Arri Pauw

FREEDOM
IN A
FRAMEWORK

Mobilising Ownership & Commitment

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CONTENT

Acknowledgement **21**

Foreword **25**

Introduction **27**

Part 1. Understanding the Dynamics of People and Organisations **38**
1.1 Introduction into the Dynamics 39
1.2 The Power of Healthy Friction 47
Summary & Questions 53

Part 2. Mastering Freedom **56**
Introduction 57
2.1 EQ & IQ in leadership 60
2.2 Leadership over the discussion 63
2.3 Person A and Person B, moving from Point A to Point B 67
2.4 Behaviours critical to Relationships & Results 72
2.5 The behaviour loop behind interactions 78
2.6 How the brain contributes to Healthy Friction 83
2.7 Freedom needs mastery 89
Summary & Questions 90

Part 3. Energising Frameworks **94**
Introduction 95
3.1 How to design energising frameworks 98
3.2 The framework for designing an organisation 101
3.3 The framework for designing a team 106
3.4 The framework for growing a high performing team 108
3.5 Frameworks for synchronising our behaviour 112
3.6 Frameworks foster Authenticity 147
Summary & Questions 150

Part 4. The Road Within **152**
Introduction 153
4.1 Know thyself 156
4.2 Pitfalls of leadership 158
4.3 The Road Within 169
Summary & Questions 173

Epilogue **175**

Addendum. Problem Solving and Decision-Making in a team **178**

About the Author **180**

INTRODUCTION

I was invited to work again with a CEO leading a mid-size multinational, active in some 12 countries across Europe. At the time he took on the job, performance was down at top level and bottom level. The Supervisory Board had given the CEO a clear brief: get growth at both levels. Together with his people, he defined a new strategy (redirecting and focusing energy). He restructured the organization (reallocating energy) and he re-focused and closed some factories (freeing-up energy). Then he called me and said, "all has been in place for about a year, but the turn-around in performance is still not there. Can you come and help me mobilise the people?" We worked together, connecting the people by building healthy relations across all functions, processes and countries (unleashing their withdrawn energy). The tipping point was reached after some nine months, when both the top and bottom-line turned around and kept on growing for the years to come – to the satisfaction of all parties involved.

The archetypal two core questions in leadership are "What" am I going to do and "How" will I get it done? In the 35 years I have been working across national and international business and institutional organisations, it has become very clear that the greatest challenge for leaders is *not* **what** they want to do. Most leaders have enough experience and expertise on their markets, customers and/or technical areas that they know how to differentiate their business. Being smart in defining a differentiating and competitive advantage is what they have excelled in over all those years leading up to this position.

More difficult for leaders is the challenge of **how** to get it done. Most leaders answer this question by defining budgets, reallocating resources, updating structures, and redefining business processes. Of course, they involve their close circles, set targets for the execution, and inform the wider population. In this way they address the part of the How question that is in their direct control. Few leaders master the art of what I see as the biggest How-challenge: how do I mobilise ownership and commitment, with all my people standing behind a shared vision and its implementation. It represents the desire of most leaders when you ask them how they would like to see their employees functioning. Mobilising ownership and commitment unleashes motivation and self-driven inspiration with employees, as well as creates as a depth of connected understanding that energises a self-propelled implementation of the vision, strategy and plans.

My exploration of the theme of mobilising ownership and commitment has a deep personal history. I've come to realise it has always been with me, though not as explicitly as it is today. In hindsight, I now can see how it played a pivotal role in my life, and how I lived in my younger years on both sides of the coin.

> *When I was 18, my father lost his job. He was the leader of an organisation preparing teachers for schools, teachers who would teach in all sorts of practical technical domains. A few years earlier he had been appointed to this position because he was seen as someone who could resolve the administrative and financial mess the school was in. The organisation was staffed by professionals; most had a university education. My father was, because of his family background and his limited schooling due to the 2nd World War, a self-made man – pragmatic and practical in his approaches. He knew which direction to take to sort out the mess. He had to take unpopular decisions. He took them by himself, responsibly and determinedly. Initially, people liked his clarity of direction, his decisiveness. Over time, people had to live with the impact and did not necessarily like it anymore. They started to show dissent, gossiped amongst themselves and complained to the Supervisory Board. The atmosphere turned negative. People accumulated 'evidence' against what my father was doing. He kept on pushing through what he thought was right and best for the organisation. Over time he lost the people and lost the confidence of the Supervisory Board. And then he lost his job.*
>
> *In the same period, I was goalkeeper in a football team. We were a very successful team, being number one for two seasons in a row, promoted to a higher division, winning many tournaments. Did we have outstanding players with incredible talent? No, no more than other teams. We had normal, good*

players. What made the difference was the leadership quality of our trainer and team leader. They were dedicated, in the first place to us, a very mixed group of young men. They talked with us, shared their dream to be a winning team, supported us, did special training activities, organised great team outings outside of football, and all the time they expressed their hope, their joy, their frustrations, their anger. We as young adults felt taken seriously. When all of us were in our mid-forties, we had a reunion. Guess who were at the centre, guess who we thanked again from the bottom of our hearts: our trainer and leader, who knew exactly how to turn a bunch of testosterone driven young adults into a team, sharing a real commitment to each other. For all of us, this had been a fabulous period of our young lives.

Why is it important for you, as leader, to develop the capability to mobilise ownership and commitment? For the simple reason behind which all of the people are present in your organisation. A leader has people in his organisation for one reason only: it is too much work for him alone to achieve what he wants, both hands-on and intellectually. There is no other reason for the people to be there. In order to be able to realise his vision and to achieve results, these people who joined him, who signed a labour contract, need to do what needs to be done. The extent to which people feel mobilised and have incorporated (literally: living it from within their body) the ownership and commitment to deliver, can vary greatly. Every leader knows the frustration of thinking his people will do it, only to find out later it is was partly and hesitantly done. How different does it feel for a leader, when he sees his people implementing with great enthusiasm exactly what was agreed and even more. What so many leaders don't know, forget, or think they don't have time for, is that the quality with which they mobilise ownership and commitment is the pre-condition for their people to put energy into implementing what has been agreed, in the way it has been agreed. When people feel little commitment, they will work with less than their available energy, deliver below their ability, and implement things in service of their own goals more than the company goals.

At the end of the morning, I joined the wider leadership group of the company I had been working with for some five years. As a consultant, in the afternoon I would facilitate a Management Team (MT) workshop. Over the years we had done many, and the aim of this one was to keep the MT on track. That morning, a group larger than just the MT was together to finish a three-month strategy process. In recent years, they had been very successful in top and bottom-line growth, and the intention with this updated strategy *was to continue the good work. During that final hour, I was just sitting in to be able to bridge to the afternoon session with the MT.*

Coming to the end of the session, the CEO asked everyone to give a summary of their personal opinion about the strategy. He asked them, "What do you think of the strategy we defined?" We went around the table and, without exception, people answered using positive sounding phrases. For example; it is sharp, strongly competitive, very clear, the best we could have come up with, really takes us forward, etc. When the round was finished, the CEO looked happy and was about to conclude. Then I asked him, "Before you close, can I ask another question?" "Of course," he said. I turned to the group and asked them, "Now tell me, how do you feel about the strategy as it stands?" Immediately the atmosphere in the room changed. There was some silence. The first sighs came. Then the first person spoke up, "I actually feel quite worried". And others spoke of feeling concerned, hesitant, doubtful, or of feeling a mix of positive and as they called them 'churning-disturbing' feelings. After the round, the CEO looked seriously worried. He said, "How can this be, you all just sounded so positive". It was then that I pointed out to him how our questions were complementary. He had asked how people think about the strategy. I had asked them how they feel about it. In this way, as I will describe further in this book, we together tapped into two different dimensions of people's brains, gathering complementary information. After his initial shock, the CEO agreed to change the afternoon's agenda. He asked the whole group to stay and work together to understand these underlying feelings, in addition to their thinking. We took all afternoon. The outcome was that they produced information they had not spoken about so far. By tabling their concerns and hesitations, the group collected insights about all kinds of imagined pitfalls. They hadn't discussed them because they felt stupid to speak 'negatively' about a strategy everyone was so 'positive' about. Most importantly, when we ended the meeting and asked again, but now, "What do you think of it and how do you feel about it?" people clearly expressed how much they liked to explore these concerns together. How they were now much better informed. Overall, they felt taken seriously and fully listened to. Most important, everyone expressed how they were now truly energised to take on the full implementation of the strategy, including the difficulties to come. In the following years, the company kept on delivering double digit figures on both the top and bottom line.

Informing or involving your people is very different from mobilising ownership and commitment. The first can be done, for example, in an afternoon, perhaps in a few sessions, using a top-down strategy and budget process, followed by an annual leadership group session, where the dinner and bar are critical to the success of the event. However, to mobilise ownership and commitment, a leader needs to understand the dynamics of energising human beings and use this insight in how he works with people. It requires the leader to know about the powers of listening, of dialogue, of group dynamics. It’s about him being able to postpone his own opinion, to lead a participative discussion, inviting people to participate throughout different phases like diverging, scenario building and converging. He knows what it takes to build long-lasting trusting relationships amongst a large group of people. He sees the need for confrontation, and can create a safe space for it. He knows what it takes to deal constructively with intense friction-filled discussions and knows how to prevent these from becoming conflict. He is aware of the downsides of power. He knows how to prevent authoritarian behaviour from his side because he knows how it diminishes the capacity and motivation of his people. He can explore and enjoy the beauty of differences between humans. He can take decisions at cross-roads where people come in with strong and diverse opinions. He does it in such a way that, following discussions and reaching agreement, the minority still goes along with the decision and implements it as agreed. And in all of this, this leader who masters the **How**, holds a steady course.

I have had the fortune to work with leaders who richly mastered this skill of mobilising ownership and commitment. It is beautiful to see, both for the positive energy and powerful relationships it generates among the people across the organisation, and without exception, the positive impact on results. Because apart from a humanistic reason to pay attention to developing this skill, today’s insights from neurosciences provide enough evidence that it also makes business sense to do it. For example, in his book “Your Brain and Business”, the Harvard professor Srinivasan S. Pillay clearly demonstrates the positive impact a trusting, open, dialogue-based climate has on the collective human capability of a business to foster innovation and growth. He also provides evidence the other way around. If you don’t do it, if you behave as a leader the more authoritarian way, you are creating an organisation of followers, and you don’t use and may even diminish the collective capability of your organisation to innovate. Behaviour has for many years been seen as the vague, soft factor. With today’s scientific insights, there is a direct link between the collective behaviour developed in an organisation, and the robustness and resilience in all people across the organisation to be innovative and achieve growth and results. Even in very adverse circumstances, as the next example shows.

A few years ago, an international company of some eight hundred people was suddenly and unexpectedly put up for sale. I had worked with the company for many years. Its mother company got in trouble when the economic crisis hit, and they chose to sell off the crown jewel in order to regain strategic health. For the people in the daughter company, being put up for sale came as a full surprise and shock. They were literally first informed through an article in a Saturday morning newspaper. The management team itself had been notified a few days beforehand and were told the process was still in its early days. They were ordered by the mother company to keep it secret, despite their concerns about their people. They kept it confidential, but as they feared, someone else – possibly someone from the wider team of banks, consultants, or the mother company itself leaked it to the press, and there it was, in the Saturday papers. The CEO and his management team responded immediately. Their turnaround of that situation became to me one of the most powerful demonstrations of mobilising ownership & commitment. On that Saturday morning, the mobile phones amongst the top seventy-five rang and rang. The news spread like a hot, dry fire. Within about an hour after the first messages came in, the CEO got his management team together. They lived nearby enough to gather around 10:00 that morning. They decided to immediately call a leadership forum the next day, Sunday, at 11:00, bringing together the top seventy-five of their senior leaders from some five countries. In recent years, they had developed this platform to gather together this top seventy-five for discussions about the strategic and operational evolution and hurdles of the business. It had become a well-established and widely appreciated platform, normally happening twice or three times a year.

Before 12:00 that Saturday afternoon each management team member had been in mobile phone contact with their direct reports and invited them to the Sunday Leadership Forum. The next morning, Sunday at 11:00, seventy-four of the seventy-five were present. Over a three-hour process, they were first informed about the actual status quo and the background. Secondly the full group was split in smaller subgroups to talk about what it meant to them personally, what they thought about it, and how they felt. It was a session of sharing the surprise, shock, anger, pain, anxiety and for some also an opportunity to talk about what "they" were doing with "our" company, combined with exchanging information about and understanding the reality of the situation, also with the mother company. Thirdly, time was given to explore and agree the next steps.

In some eighteen hours, on the Monday morning to come, each of

> *the seventy-five would collect their people in their respective part of the organisation and contact third parties like customers, suppliers, press, and other local contacts. Scenarios and key messages were prepared, Questions and Answers defined, and ideas and overviews of proactive initiatives shared. By 15:00 that Sunday afternoon, the meeting was concluded. Everyone went home. Although the future of the business was still equally insecure and it had interrupted their precious Sunday family time, all of them shared their appreciation for this immediate gathering. They felt connected with their colleague-friends, having at least partly digested the initial rush of emotions. They also felt stronger because they were prepared to stand up as leaders, meet their people, and face their challenges on the Monday morning. All of this was achieved within one day after the bomb-shell news bulletin.*

The ultimate reason for me to write this book is driven by the rapid evolution of the world around us, and how this is impacting us as human beings, as citizens of countries and as members of organisations. For a leader to be ready for what is today emerging and will tomorrow be a reality, time is pressing. My experience and perspective on the evolving reality tells me that the traditional way of addressing the How question is no longer enough to be successful. As part of the wider trends in society, our business world has also entered a new era. In yesterday's world, success could still be based on adding value through smart mechanical-technological thinking. A world where three-dimensional step-by-step sequential logic was the foundation of all of our processes, all of our products, all of our production and logistical methods of all of our decision-making. But these principles will no longer do. Hardly any more today, and definitely not tomorrow.

Over recent decades and in more and more areas of society and organisations, we have grown into a reality where the source of competitive advantage is derived from the holistic, parallel, intuitive and multi-dimensional ultra-high-speed way in which we transform data into dynamic information and are able to act upon it. It is not my intention to describe here and now the Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) revolution that is going on. That would be way beyond my competence and there are other authors who are much better at doing so. What is however clear to me, is that the time has passed where one leader could, by himself, master multifunctional, multi-process, multinational wide streams of data and channel them into a sequential rational decision-making process leading to logic conclusions and targets, followed by a logical plan.

In order to be a leader in today's multidimensional world of dynamic vibrating evermoving complexity, leaders will have to mobilise the intuitive brightness of all their people to the maximum. A brightness through which they, as leaders, bring together the greatest potential variety of perspectives of as many as possible people, in order to both grasp the actual situation as well as to scope and select the possibilities of solutions. Not sequential, not with a beginning and end, but as a constant dynamic flow. This brightness can only be accessed through combining the rationality and intuition of the people: rationality being the result of their functional, craft-like built up expertise; intuition being the result of their inner subconscious blending all of the expertise, experience and knowledge, from whatever background, and without any control in time or sequence over the outcome. When a leader is able to unleash and master the multitude of truly authentic capabilities across their people through this intuition-based blending process, the organisation will experience an unknown force of problem solving and innovation. An organisation which wants to exist tomorrow, a leader who wants to be successful in today's and tomorrow's markets, expands therefore their use of the How question, and grows the capacity to truly engage and connect people.

Through my work over the past 25 years, I have seen the potency of digital information grow exponentially. In the early nineties, in the early days of the internet, any file we tried to send around became corrupted. Presentations could be done from our computers, but we couldn't send them without rework. With my clients, I saw SAP and other operating systems, step-by-step, providing an increasingly integrated perspective. In the beginning, the purpose of investing in these operating systems was increased cost competitiveness and a higher customer service. Over three decades, the evolution has been phenomenal. Today's A.I. algorithms and related systems facilitate the possibilities of 'organising' multifunctional, multi-process, multi-geographical, multi-ingredient, matrix-in-matrix-in-matrix complexities of an organisation. In this interwoven and interdependent reality, hierarchy is no longer the solution. I am involved in leadership teams who are together reinventing how to deal with this reality. Their organisation has more in common with a living organism than with any form of a traditional structure. Decision-making is being allocated to crunch-points in the constant flowing exchange of information. Leaders are there to provide the context and to set the boundaries. There's no way they can decide on details in the every-day moment. Decision-making through hierarchy would slow down the process and cause stagnation. One thing is very clear to me: these leaders have to

> *build the framework, let go within, be courageous, and constantly grow their people. They need to trust their people and live it.*

The final reason for me to write this book is my personal longing. I have seen for myself the impact it has if you, as a leader, truly follow the principles and methods of mobilising ownership and commitment with your people. And, importantly, what happens if you don't. The impact is not only on the problem-solving power and innovation boost it will give. It is also on the joint robustness and resilience of you as leader, with all of your people, to deal with the ever-present organisational challenges. Ultimately, it is about the results this will give and the shared joy that the process and results bring all of you. My mission in my work is "growing relationships for growing results".

This book has four parts. The first is an introduction into "The Dynamics of People and Organisations". It will take you into the fundamental needs of both people and organisations, and how they strongly oppose each other. For people, it is critical they experience freedom. For an organisation, it is central that everyone obeys the frameworks. The core of mobilising ownership and commitment is therefore to create Freedom in a Framework. When diving into these opposing needs, you wonder how it is possible for people and organisations to benefit from one another. For this, I will lead you into the beauty of Healthy Friction, as the universal driver for both people and organisations to unleash growth.

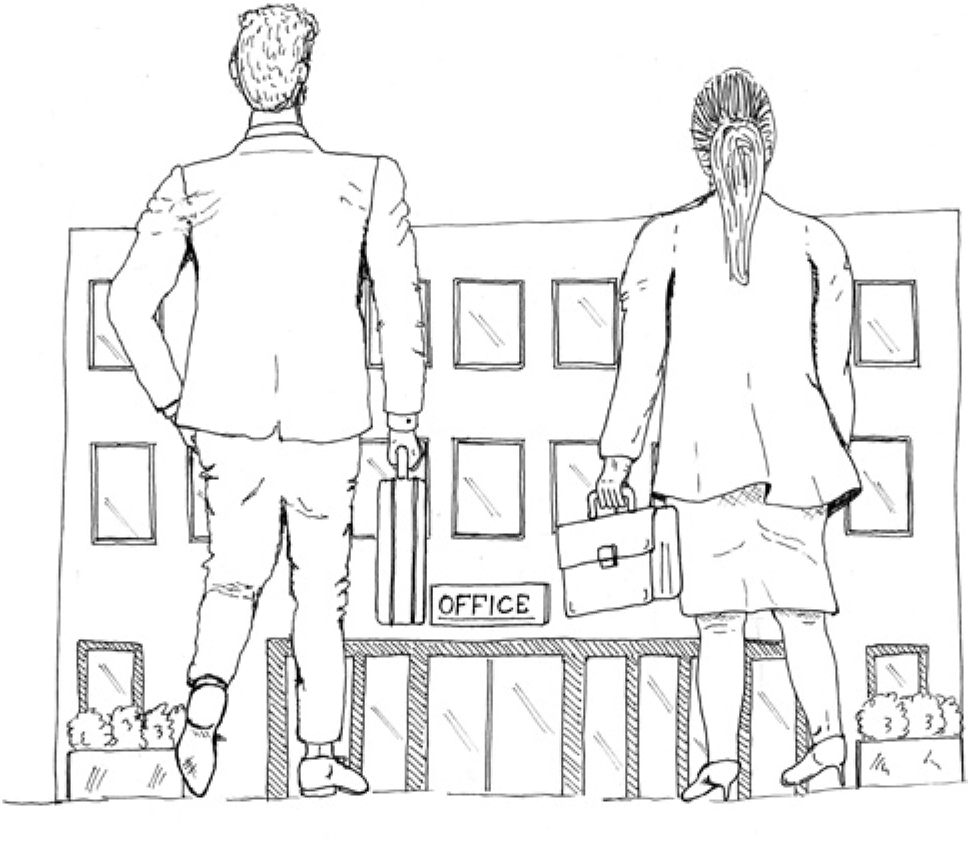
Part 2 will be about Mastering Freedom. We humans have thoughts, we have intentions, we have strategies on paper, but none of this in and of itself gives results. We need to interact. We do that through behaviour. As human beings we manifest ourselves, we contribute, we turn thoughts, intentions, strategies on paper into results through behaviour. We show behaviour through contracting our muscles, which in turn we use to interact with other people. Behaviour is nothing more than "expressed muscle contraction". The behaviour we, in the moment, actually demonstrate is critical to the quality of our interactions with fellow human beings; so also with our colleagues at work. We may demonstrate behaviour that makes people turn away from us, e.g. by being dominant and dictating to others. This hampers the functioning of our minds and blocks interactions, creates distrust, and disconnects us from each other; in other words, it is behaviour that *hinders* our relationships and thus results. We may demonstrate behaviour in interactions that stimulates new ideas, gives trust, provides direction, that strengthens the relationship; in other words, behaviour that *helps* our relationships and thus the results.

Part 3 is about Energising Frameworks. Not in the sense of what kind of networked or team-based structures, processes or organisation design is today most lean, agile or competitive. These kinds of structures and how they are implemented are often more mental models. Part 3 is about how I, as leader, compose the framework in such a way that it energizes people to be part of it. The questions will be addressed which I need to raise in designing a framework which people own and feel committed to work with and within. It is also about how I need to deal with these topics, by exploring the key questions I need to address when designing an organisation, a team or developing a team into a high performing team. To guide the interaction in organisations and teams, five behavioural frameworks will be defined regarding recurring themes that have proven to be core to a leader mastering the art of mobilising ownership and commitment. These themes are Power, Growth, Choice, Growth, Connectivity.

Part 4 is about going on the Road Within as Leader. About what it takes to be a leader embracing the art of mobilising ownership and commitment with people. First, a leader has to master the ability to design, facilitate and then allow all their people and the entire organisation to live 'Freedom in a Framework'. Ultimately, it is about feeling confident in yourselves as leader to do this. I will address what you as a leader can do to grow yourself and become robust and resilient in living this quality.

All examples, as well as many sections of the book, are written in the I (the first-person). The reason for this is to bring you, the reader, as close as possible to what it means to explore this journey of mobilising ownership and commitment. Whenever you read I in normal print, you are reading about an imaginary leader, and are being asked to put yourself into their perspective. Furthermore, all case-examples are in *italics* — everything in *italics* is a story capturing my personal experience, from my private life or work life. When it is work related, I have modified the cases such that the message is still there, but the person cannot be recognised, even if you think otherwise.

PART 1.
UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS



1.1 Introduction into the Dynamics

Picture an International Holding, a company founded by a farmer who had a vision to bring the high-quality food he produced to as many people as possible. The vision emerged from the success he had enjoyed in his neighbourhood. Everyone liked the food he and his wife offered them, and selling it into the wider world would bring him much better revenues than through the farmers' cooperative. He built the company from scratch, then his son took over. His son really liked the family character of the business and expanded it in multiple directions, creating opportunities for all his children to be involved. The business grew and grew, and the company became a holding, with him leading all divisions. When I got involved, it was in trouble. The division representing some 75% of the business had its own Management Team (MT) and Managing Director (MD), however it was more a fight club than a team. The MD was seen by the other MT members as 'standing in the way' of their access to the owner so they just looked after their own domains. Any synergy that would optimise the totality but not the personal agenda of an MT member was sabotaged. They all played their relationship with the owner directly, trying to please him with what he wanted to hear. The owner in turn still had a close feel and a strong opinion about how they operated their domains. He was not shy of letting them know if they acted differently from how he thought they should. He intervened where he could, at will and without any warning upfront. He bypassed the MD where he wanted to, and he sacked people he didn't like. He forcefully rejected criticism on how his children were leading a division; he didn't want to hear it. When asked whether he saw the impact of what he did, he responded: "I'm the owner, I have the vision, I grew the business to what it is today, I know what is best, just listen and do as I tell you". Meanwhile, deeper in the organisation many talented newcomers left the organisation.

Every form of organisation once started with a person who has a vision he wanted to realise. Every leader who became successful in manifesting his vision and achieved the results he hoped for, has watched his reality being challenged step-by-step. Success meant that he could no longer do it alone, in all the ways he believed best and that he himself wanted. Success meant he needed support and had to get more people around him. And one day he found himself, rather than working on achieving the beauty of his vision, having to deal most of his time with the dynamics of people and the organisation. Being the leader, from then on, he had to demonstrate leadership.

The dynamics of people and the organisation are both a blessing and a major challenge to leaders. It is only by recruiting and involving other people that a successful leader can grow the capacity to deliver results. Only through people can he get more done then he could ever do alone. Only through additional people can he bring more experience and expertise together than he could ever master himself. And only by organising his people, by creating structures, by defining roles, and by allocating tasks and responsibilities, could they work together synergistically and accomplish an amount of work no-one could ever do alone. With people coming in, the leader has to build an organisation. By organising the structures and processes for consistently generating added value, he can achieve growing, reproducible levels of output. Organising all of this efficiently and effectively is what gives him the advantage over the competition.

It's not my task here to praise the upside of what people and the organisation bring a leader. What I am interested in is how a leader can learn to deal with the downside, which inevitably emerges when one, two, three, fifty, hundreds, thousands of people join together, and the leader has to build an organisation around them. People and organisations generate their own independent and often counter-acting dynamics: dynamics one cannot solve or avoid; dynamics which are driven by the respective characteristics of people and organisations, and which heavily influence each other. As a leader, you have to live with them, learn how to deal with them and how to master them, at least, if you want to enjoy and capitalise on the potential both can bring. What I have seen too often, is that leaders only address the needs of the organisation, and often only superficially. They think they are ready when they have designed the business processes, hierarchical structures, meeting structures, and roles and responsibilities, at best clarifying decision-making authorities through allocating who is responsible and who is accountable for what. But that is not enough.
In the actual reality, different characteristics of the organisation and a whole set of human characteristics interplay with each other, and create a dynamic which, when led well, generates a positive swing. But when a leader is not giving the attention necessary to make this interplay work, these characteristics distort everyday cooperation within the organisation, to the deep frustration of the leader. I will show this dynamic by introducing the most prominent and influential characteristics, and illustrate how they play out for an individual human being and for the organisation.

The first dynamic is between uniqueness and sameness. An organisation drives sameness. To be successful, we all have to work towards achieving 'the same'. We all need to demonstrate alignment with the strategy by using the same definition, the same wording when articulating it. We need to show we have the same understanding of our business model, our KPIs, our customers, our processes, our policies, etcetera, etcetera. When hiring people, the organisation sends them on an induction program the day they join, so they understand “how we do things here”. And when each employee demonstrates sameness, shows they fit in, acts as they are expected to, the leaders are confident in them and think the organisation is well on its way towards generating results.

But as a human being, I’m looking at how to manifest my own uniqueness. Although I recognise the people around me as fellow human beings, I know I am different. I want to be recognised for who I am. I was hired, so I was told, because I possess the unique qualities they looked for. They really needed “me” is what they said. And I want to show and grow my qualities. I want to be recognised for my unique perspective and give a unique contribution. I may have the same job-title and job-description as many colleagues. But only I can and will do my role the way I do it. And if they want me to fit in, speak the same as all others, I feel an objection. Because I am not like them. I am me.

The doorbell rang. I knew it would be the professor who’d came for coaching. This was his third session. Straight after sitting down in my office, he gave a huge sigh: “pppffffff, it’s impossible how people work at this university; they leave me hardly any time to do my research.” When asking him what was going on, he explained how he constantly had to fulfil what he saw as all sorts of bureaucratic requirements. For example, demands coming from Finance regarding his budgets and his actual spending. And as he said, “I know I have used money from one project for another. But what’s the problem, I know what I spent it on; I have to justify that to my client, not to them. They should only look whether the total sum of my finances is OK, and not waste my time with how I spent every Euro.” And then he talked about how the Human Resources (HR) people were chasing him to do the appraisals of all the employees in his department. He said, “People know what I think of them, I’ve no time for all these artificial conversations. If something is wrong with someone, I’ll let them know!”

After blowing off steam about these support departments, his strongest irritation erupted. “Listen, now the university wants me to fit my research into their strategic themes, so they can use it for getting money from the government. What type of university is this? Research is the work of free spirits, not of bureaucrats!” It was clear to me, he needed to blow off some steam before we could talk about how to deal with the reality, as he experienced it; the reality of the university which he had chosen to be a better place for conducting his research than the 100% autonomy of doing research in his garage at home. A reality with benefits and consequences.....