

Q&A from Webinars

Has Kai got a coach or a mentor or does he know someone who can be a sparring partner to work through different scenarios so he can come up with a strategy?

Kai's reply: Obviously, I am discussing strategic issues with my immediate superior. However, since he is a member of the Executive Board, it has to be kept to a reasonable extent. I did not and currently do not have a coach.

When it comes to business issues, my direct reports are my collective sparring partner, with my mantra being: ~~E~~ Everything has to hit the table. then it is out in the open and everybody can contribute, agree or disagree. Within this First Team, we have come up with some ground rules for collaboration, one of them being ~~D~~ Disagree & Commit i.e. everybody is invited to strongly, yet rationally disagree to any topic until a decision is taken. That's the point of no return, when everybody is expected to back up the decision and to not second-guess it ever again. That's a strong rule for sparring with each other.

For the emotional highs and lows, my wife Petra is my home base and more often than not my advisor . or stabilizer.

Is this the role of the Indian coach we see in the film?

Kai's reply: Vijay Bhat, the consultant in the film, is the Bangalore-based owner of Roots & Wings. He has run several trainings for my team and was one of three consultants involved in bringing up the Blue Behaviours. Vijay is and has been extremely helpful in bridging the Indian and the European cultures, since before starting his own business, he had worked on international assignments for an international advertising agency.

He has also supported us last year in creating our own 360°-feedback tool based on the Blue Behaviours, which provided high quality inputs to key managers.

At the end of the film there is an expressed wish you move the "change" a bit slower, how is Kai reacting to this? Is there a deadline set by the organisation?

Kai's reply: I have always been, and been made aware, that I am going at a high pace. I must admit, that's the way I like it, and probably need it.

Somehow, at age 40, I am waiting for the natural course of events to slow me down, which did not happen till date.

On a more serious note, I have seen for myself that too many projects and change initiatives are not digestible for the organization, and heeded the advice from my managers. In fact, these days I was inspired to officially declare a moratorium for organizational and strategic changes for the next 12 months in order to focus on implementation and execution. I guess, this comes up to the team's sentiment and I will make sure not to falter on this commitment.

How does his valuable experience gets to be an asset for the organisation?

Kai's reply: Beiersdorf has a very team-oriented culture, where people are sticking around for many years, and personal ties are strong. It is a great culture for exchanging ideas and inspiring each other.

In this sense, I have always shared my ideas and what we are implementing in India with a large number of colleagues around the world. Some of them have picked up initiatives like the Blue Behaviours and modified them for their culture. Likewise, me and my team have been inspired by what other teams are doing. It is a nice, amicable give and take.

How have Bulgaria and India changed you in the eyes of others? (Observable changes have there been in your behaviour.)

Kai's reply: This is a little tough to answer, as probably my colleagues and friends would be better placed to do so. From my own perception and from feedback I received, I have become more accommodating to accept different solutions, or different ways so solve an issue. Germans are quite strict when it comes to defining a roadmap and wouldn't like to digress too much from their initial thought. I have somehow learned to appreciate and allow a different approach.

Also, I have become more diplomatic in dealing with different people. Again, Germans tend to be pretty straight forward, even ruthlessly blunt. Both of which is no good idea, neither in Bulgaria nor in India. So, while I can still be extremely blunt, I make more of a conscious choice in this respect to suite my counterpart and to be assertive.

Have you had feedback from bosses, colleagues (formal appraisals or informal) on this?

Kai's reply: I had earlier mentioned the 360°-process we have designed based on the Blue Behaviours. Obviously, I have undergone this process myself and shared the results with my direct reports in order to define my development plan. The same process I requested from all of them.

With the First Team we are also running once per year a facilitated feedback session, where we take it in turns to be in the hot seat taking positive and negative feedback from the group (without being allowed to immediately comment), followed by a clarifying Q&A session. While this has certain dangers of things going overboard, till date I have always found it enriching and worth taking the risk. When issues get too touchy, I jump in and try to mitigate the danger, but it was hardly ever required.

How will this development benefit HQ when you go back in terms of your leadership style?

Kai's reply: I guess, like every manager, who has worked abroad, outside his/her home culture, I will keep having a different, somehow broader, perspective on whatever (business) challenge comes my way for the rest of my life. In an ever more globalizing world, an international exposure has become the new normal, and changed corporate culture in many ways.

Beyond doubt, my catalogue of criteria for evaluating problems and for taking decisions has been changed by my past experiences, and hopefully positively prepared me for new challenges ahead. Taking a look at Beiersdorf today compared to ten years back, it has tremendously changed by having more and more managers like me returning to HQ with an international experience and, likewise, by colleagues from affiliates spending some time as expats in HQ. This culture shift to my opinion cannot be replicated by any other means, but by investing in (and getting returns from) cross-border assignments.

Was there anything specifically Indian in the red-blue behaviours which were married with BDF values?

Kai's reply: Well, first of all, the Blue Behaviours have been developed by a team of Indian NIVEA-managers. In this sense, there is the strongest possible influence of Indian values as these colleagues have given their inputs based on their specifically Indian work-experience and their interaction with bosses, peers and subordinates. The task obviously was, to put the global Beiersdorf values into a meaningful context for India.

However, as it turned out, the charm of the Blue Behaviours probably is that they are pretty universal, globally valid and easy to agree upon. That's how they got adopted by some other country organizations.

However, when you look at them from a particularly Indian perspective, some of them get a slightly different connotation, in the sense of a specifically Indian relevance. Take e.g. the call for 'having a planning mindset'. This sounds useful regardless of cultural background. However, it gets a different urgency when knowing that in the widely spoken Hindi language, there is only one word for 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' (kal) and another one for 'today' (aaj). With language being a strong carrier of culture, this little example signifies that Indians have a strong concept of and focus on the here and now. Planning for tomorrow is not necessarily ingrained in it.

Did the Indian colleagues express anything ("What we Indians really need is...") which was not on Kai's immediate radar that could be incorporated?

Kai's reply: In fact, the process that led to the Blue Behaviours was a three day offsite meeting with all first- and second-level managers (about forty people in those days), apart from me all of them Indians from various parts of this vast, arguably multi-cultural country. So, whatever the team felt useful to be tabled and integrated into the concept got mentioned and addressed.

For sure, the Blue Behaviours would have had a very different impact, if I or just the management team had defined and forced them on the organization. This was done by the team for the team. Nobody could reasonably claim full authorship or full irresponsibility for the outcome. That's what made it a genuine, powerful tool.

However, it took my resolve and push to give this precious tool the right attention and space in the organization, else it would have easily been forgotten over daily work and pressures.

I feel a need to see (a part of) the content of a coffee talk: what do they talk about? Does Kai give an opening to talk personal? Could it also be personal from Kai's part?

Kai's reply: The CTTs (coffee table talks) are purposely kept agenda free. The only standard I keep is, for the first CTT with any new employee to define the ground rules:

- The CTT will only be useful, if I am given the true and fair picture from the colleagues individual perspective . I want to hear the good side and the bad side of life and work at NIVEA India.
- I can only open the door and listen very attentively, the colleague has to decide whether to walk though this door, i.e. to trust me and open up on the issues.
- The contents of our one-on-one talk remains absolutely confidential. No piece of information will be passed to anybody, so that no issue can be traced back to its source. I always point at a simple logic: If I ever misuse even one information given in such talk, the whole organization will quickly get to know it . resulting in nobody ever sharing sensitive topics with me anymore, ever again. This, it is in my own interest to keep confidentiality.
- I promise upfront, if personal issues with the superior will be tabled, we will decide together how to tackle them, or to agree in giving it some more time before action is eventually taken.

Does Kai keep on going with the coffee talks or is it just in the beginning to get to know each other?

Kai's reply: The CTTs are an essential part of our cultural DNA. I make it a point to invite five colleagues from all parts and levels of the organisation every month, so most employees had several turns with me. After the initial phase, where only I had done CTTs, I had asked and inspired my direct reports and all other managers to perform their own CTTs with their team, which gave them a much better understanding on the issues in their part of the organization.

In fact, we are now planning and tracking the number of CTTs happening in each department on a monthly basis. They get documented as one KPI in our monthly dashboard.

This works for every country/culture, doesn't it?

Kai's reply: I do not see any reason, why it should not work in any country. Obviously, the degree of upfront frankness and deliberation will vary in each distinct culture. I can imagine, that certain cultures might require more than one CTT before people believe in the sincerity of the manager and the tool.

For sure, you have to have an authentic interest in the person in front of you and be able to convey this. Who would be comfortable to share any critical topic with a half-interested manager, or with a superior with a track-

record of being a chatter-box? It only truly works, if a certain trust is running between both parties.

How does it look like: pushy, but not too pushy.... It is pushy connected to the theme's, results, aims of the meeting, isn't it?

Kai's reply: In fact, getting pushy will be absolutely counter-productive. Nobody feels comfortable to reveal crucial or uncomfortable details while being pushed to the wall and feeling under interrogation. As the manager, your only job is to listen actively, probe cautiously to get the full picture and to rather take the role of a coach than a judge & jury on what is being shared.

When talking to a number of people on a regular, monthly basis, you are every time getting a new part of a bigger jigsaw, which eventually makes sense after identifying some common red lines that lead you to see the full, big picture.

Would it be possible add role-plays on these items?

Kai's reply: Absolutely. I ran several assertiveness training with my team and found it very useful, since most of them revealed a tendency to only see the world through their eyes, having a hard time to take the other side's position and appreciate it. I integrated role-plays that were staging a CTT, where, instead of just listening (forget about *active* listening), most participants after a few minutes were indeed getting pushy, offering their views or simply telling the other part what they will definitely have to do.

So, yes, role-playing a CTT prepares for the real thing.