

The Inner Team

Collating the voices to find the safest path



Who do you listen to most often in your team? The careful one? The adventurous one? Maybe the creative one? In this article, Elke Werner-Keppner details how we can become safer through real dialogue, discussion and repeated reviews.

Picture this everyday scene. A service team stands at the top of the stairs. The door leading to the flat roof is open, the men look outside. Welded plastic membranes cover the industrial building's roof to shield it from rain water. Walking routes across the roof are laid out with paving slabs. Light domes made of unstable acrylic glass are integrated in the roof.

The men's job is to change the filter of a technical ventilation unit on the roof. Nothing special, pure routine, it won't take long.

The walking routes on the roof lead to and around the ventilation unit. One of the light domes is very close to the ventilation unit. In order to do their job, the service team need to be on the walking route between the ventilation unit and the unsecured edge of the roof.

In accordance with their company's standards they carry out a quick "Last Minute Risk Assessment", aka an LMRA. This leads to the following controllable risks: falling down from the roof edge and falling into the light dome if accidentally stepped on. The resulting measure? The use of safety harnesses. The safety ropes can be hooked up at pre-determined points. The company standard requires everybody in such situations to be secured at any time.

Unfortunately, the team – once already in the staircase – realises that they ▶



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don’t have the safety harnesses at hand. They would need to get them from the technical centre. As you can imagine, the following discussion ensues:

Colleague A:

I do understand the standard, but... the technical centre is really far away. And I will have to climb up the stairs again!

Colleague B:

I think I could do the job at a spot where I could work safely – even without safety harness.

Colleague C:

Will that go well, if I don’t carry a safety harness?

Colleague D:

Just a moment, I will go and get my safety harness from the technical centre and then do the job. It will just have to wait these 10 minutes.

Colleague A:

10 minutes are quite a long time. By then, I could have done the job three times...

Colleague B:

It won’t go too bad... How often have I done this job and how often did I get hurt doing it? No risk, no fun.

Colleague E:

I certainly want to wear the safety harness. I think it’s much too dangerous without it.

Colleague C:

Wearing the safety harness I don’t have enough freedom of movement. That could be dangerous as well – or at least the job would take longer than planned.

Colleague F:

I could surely find a possibility to be safe and thus work safely – even without safety harness.

TEAM LEADER:

Keep calm everyone! It won’t work like this. This discussion takes too much time already and we still have enough to do today. We do know how to move safely on a roof, don’t we?

ALL OF THEM:

Sure!

TEAM LEADER:

Of course there have been severe injuries from falls, but not in our team. We are certainly no beginners.

Colleague A (introvertedly):

Next time, I will think of the safety harness ahead of time, so I don’t need to go all the way twice and I am safe anyway.

Colleague D:

So, let’s do this job now and then off to the next job!

TEAM LEADER:

Ah, there you go... these 10 minutes can be saved. We can move in a professional way without falling down, even without safety harness.

At this point, fate takes its course.

The further course of this story, however, we rather leave to your imagination.

I wonder whether you really believe that this discussion took place?

Oh yes, it took place! But in fact, there weren’t seven service workers – only one! And you wouldn’t have been able to listen to the discussion. Because it all happened within this man. We call these voices the inner team. It consists of different characters, is always active and always many-voiced.

Only after having heard all voices the service worker came to a decision. Let us hope that it turned out all right this time. ►



The inner dialogue

The inner dialogue refers to Das Innere Team/The Inner Team, by Friedemann Schulz von Thun.

Each of us knows this situation: If we listen into ourselves, we rarely find only one single “voice” speaking about a certain situation or subject. There are different inner voices, who seldom agree, and who all make efforts to influence our external communication and our actions. If a person needs to take a difficult decision they enter into an inner dialogue. The following voices are very common.

The inner driver:

- Character – They look ahead and want to get things done

- Value – Performance

- Slogan – Let’s do it, close your eyes and hope for the best! No way back anymore!

The cool head:

- Character – They evaluate, stay calm even in very hectic situations and rely on facts

- Value – Rationality

- Slogan – Concentrate on facts and evaluate advantages and disadvantages

The one with self-doubts:

- Character – They are never certain, always afraid to fail, to be overburdened or to make mistakes

- Value – Suspicion / uncertainty

- Slogan – Isn’t that too much for you?

The careful one:

- Character – They rather step back than break new ground, rely on routines, and new things rather scare them

- Value – Prudence

- Slogan – Rather do it the way you know

The communicative one:

- Character – They need others and discussion. Thinking is easier if they are allowed to talk while thinking

- Value – Together

- Slogan – First of all, I need the others’ opinions

The creative head:

- Character – They are curious, want to try new things, to move on...

- Value – Development

- Slogan – Wow, there are masses of new opportunities coming up

The adventurer:

- Character – They want to discover and find everything new interesting

- Value – Boldness

- Slogan – I am excited to find out what is awaiting me

The comfortable one:

- Character – They concentrate on what is necessary and strive to find easy, not strenuous, solutions

- Value – Calm and quality of life

- Slogan – I don’t want to have to make yet another choice ▶

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Did you recognise the different characters of our example?

- Colleague A – The comfortable one
- Colleague B – The adventurer
- Colleague C – The one with self-doubts
- Colleague D – The cool one / the inner driver
- Colleague E – The careful one
- Colleague F – The creative head

But why do these different voices exist?

Each voice represents one facet of our own personality. Often, they consider a situation from different perspectives and discuss conflicts between our values. The efficient use of resources like time and strength are always a factor in the discussion, often enough also risk tolerance and the appeal of novelty. As values, we repeatedly find efficiency and self-protection. Sometimes, entrepreneurial advantages play a role as value.

Consciousness versus routine (...and bad habits)

Actually, it should be child’s play to use our brain to soberly think the facts of a situation over and stop bad habits. Why, however, do so many people fail at their good resolutions? Why is it so often that we don’t wear the PPE?

In our hypothetical example about the inner team, reason prevails up to the Last Minute Risk Assessment, since it was part of a learnt routine. However, as the result seemed to be unpleasant and a personal decision was needed the comfortable and adventurous voices dominated.

Unfortunately, even in our everyday life, inner dialogues are not always objective and their final decisions are not always guided by the facts of a situation. Past experience takes much more influence because of two reasons.

Firstly, speaking in terms of evolution, the brain areas saving routines are very old – dinosaurs had them. After all, routine and repetition were important for surviving even in prehistoric times.

Secondly, processes in the routine brain areas are carried out fast as lightning. Processes of conscious acting, however, need more time. The old brain area offers a routine to save time and effort, long before conscious perception and valuation of facts have taken place. This, however, does not always lead to the correct result. So for emotional reasons we have decided to work without PPE long before our consciousness gets active. And then we look for apparently objective reasons in order to justify ourselves.

Why our brains love routine

Routines make life easier, since habits help our brains save energy. We write and read in an effortless way once we have learnt these processes. All habits – even the bad ones – work on the principle of routine, having developed from successful experience.

The “Last Minute Risk Assessment”, LMRA, is a method companies should give to their single workers and make them practice it. This method asks for some thinking time before starting a job if the situation is not exactly known. It is a guided process of rationally assessing a situation in order to produce safe action. However, during this process an inner dialogue takes place, which finally and decisively influences the action ►



that follows, even before the LMRA has been completed. Thus, it is no surprise that the LMRA does not always lead to the desired safe action.

Summary

If we want employees and colleagues to wear safety harnesses, we need to change their routines. We have to question their established action, actively discuss new actions with them and, above all, train it. Training is especially important to create new routines of action. Words and thoughts are important to set values which influence action; however, they do not determine action by themselves.

Management and experts have to make clear in a believable way, again and again, that they won't tolerate any action other than safe action. Thus, values and actions of the employees will change. Very slowly, of course, but slowly but surely we will get there.

Using LMRA should always start with intensive "consciousness-raising" characterised by "real dialogue", discussion and repeated reviews.

LMRA needs to be trained and practiced intensively to become a personal routine, to increasingly drown out the voices of the comfortable one and the adventurer as part of our everyday routine. ■

Author



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etalon international GmbH

The German based etalon international GmbH was founded by Elke Werner-Keppner and Dr Volker Koch, based on their experience in supporting and leading change culture processes with innovative tools to improve knowledge, attitude and behaviour in multi-national enterprises. With its strong roots in behaviour oriented occupational safety, etalon is able to offer on one hand a broad scope of expertise ranging to environmental protection and health, and on the other hand leadership development and coaching. The etalon team comprises experts with more than 20 years' experiences in the fields of psychology, environmental protection and communication.

All team members are working in close cooperation with their clients as qualified specialists in projects as consultants, coaches, trainers, lecturers and seminar leaders and contribute to the successful management of customer's projects.

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