Leading When You're Not the Boss

How to Get Things Done in
Complex Corporate Cultures

Featuring a Story of
Situational Leadership in 4 Acts

Roger Strathausen

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Roger Strathausen is a business consultant with expertise in leadership, organizational design, process modeling, corporate universities, talent strategy, coaching, and functional team building whose clients are chiefly multinational companies. He was previously a senior manager at Accenture and an employee at SAP. Dr. Strathausen lectures at the Technical University of Berlin and the Berlin School of Economics and Law (HWR). He previously lectured at the University of Heidelberg and the University of Kaiserslautern. Strathausen took his PhD from Stanford University while on Fulbright and Stanford Dissertation Fellowships and his MA from the University of Tuebingen. His website is: www.strathausen.com

Acknowledgments

Preface

"So, who are you, and who do you want to be?"

A friend asked me this question in 1996, after I had told him I was looking for work. I had just finished my Humanities Ph.D. at Stanford University when I decided to move back to Germany to find a job in business. I had come to Germany absolutely convinced that, with my doctorate degree from a world-famous university, it would not be difficult to find a job.

It took only a couple of weeks to learn the opposite was true. I wrote about 30 specific and well-researched applications to a variety of companies, from travel agencies to business consulting, and got 30 rejections. Every week my applications were returned to me in big envelopes, and with standard cover letters: "Thank you for your application. After a thorough review, we are sorry to inform you that your skills do not fit our job requirements." So once again, *my skills didn't fit.*

When I still had not found a job a couple of months after my return to Germany, I remembered my friend's question and started re-thinking my approach. It wasn't really about finding a job, it was about finding out what I really wanted: *the right job for me, one that matched my strengths and talents!*

At the age of 30, I started focusing on one of the things I have always been good at and enjoyed doing: teaching. I taught English lessons at private institutions, for ten dollars an hour. When I told my friend about my work as an English teacher, he suggested that I teach English to the employees of his company. He employed about 15 people and dealt with hardware storage and disc arrays—a very innovative and lucrative business at the time.

During the English lessons, I came to know the company, and the employees liked me. One evening, when everybody else had already left, my friend asked me to have a chat with him. "I have been observing you," he said. "You learn quickly, you are enthusiastic about new ideas, and you can get people excited. For quite some time now, I have been thinking about adding a software division to the hardware business, but I can't do it by myself. I believe you would be perfect for setting this up together with me. Are you interested?"

There it was: leadership at work! My friend did not have a job opening that quickly needed to be filled. Rather, he saw talent and created a job he knew would benefit both sides, his company, and me.

I accepted my friend's proposal, and I never regretted it. In fact, none of the jobs I have had in my professional career ever were the result of official applications to an HR department. Even after I went on from the small hardware company to work for a large software house, and later for an even larger consulting firm, I always got hired because people realized my skills and more or less created a position that would enable me to make use of these skills.

My fascination with the topic of leadership arose while working in large corporations. The buzzing of ten- and even a hundred-thousand people working together can be thrilling and motivating. But it may also make you feel small and insignificant once you hit the first walls and understand that the chance of turning your ideas into reality are limited by the position you are in.

How can you secure the support of others when you are not their boss, if all you have to offer are your ideas and skills?

When we read about leadership on company websites and in internal memos, we find the term applied almost exclusively to managers and top-level executives officially running big teams or whole organizations. Yet is it true that leadership only happens on executive floors and in board rooms? What about normal employees? Is there really no leadership taking place on the ground floor and at the front lines, where the majority of corporate work actually happens day by day?

I believe leadership not only exists for people without official management functions, but actually is more important here than anywhere else in the organization. For many years now, I have been an independent consultant, leading client teams without possessing formal authority over them. Clients accept my leadership because they believe that the team and the whole company will benefit from our joint work.

My attitude toward leadership may best be described by a fairy tale my mother used to read to me and my brother when we were kids. It's called *The King and the Shepherd*:

Once upon a time, there was a king who vowed that anyone should be allowed to marry his beautiful daughter if he could only answer one particular question the king had. However, if the suitor did not know the answer to the king's question, it would cost him his head. So many princes and noblemen came to the castle, but no one could answer the king's question, and they all got beheaded. Until one day a poor shepherd went to the castle, and he stood in front of the king, and the king asked his question: "Where is the center of the earth?"

And the shepherd lifted his staff and hit it right down to the ground and said: "Here!"

The king shouted: "Prove it!"

And the shepherd said: "Prove the opposite."

The king couldn't, so the shepherd married the beautiful princess, and they lived happily ever after.

This story has fascinated me ever since I first heard it because it shows an essential quality that leaders must possess: the courage to take the initiative. We all can be and should be leaders! We should not be afraid to take a stand when we see that things can be improved, even if we don't have a perfect answer and if we don't have an official mandate to make changes. If in doing so we receive feedback from others that what we have said or done can be done even better, that's great! Then, together with others, we can continue improving things as a team.

Apropos "team": By the time I write this, it has already been over a year since Germany won its fourth title at the Soccer World Championship 2014 in Brazil. Sure, measured by the number and quality of chances, the 1:0 victory over Argentina in the finals was a bit lucky, and the score might have easily been reversed. But seen over the course of the whole tournament, it is certainly fair to say that the best team won, especially after the historic 7:1 triumph of Germany over the five-time champion Brazil in the semi-finals! Many other countries had better individual players than Germany, but the German coach composed the best team, sometimes putting stars on the bench because they did not fit a specific team design. It's the interaction of the whole team that wins titles, and not the stellar performance of single players!

This book has been some six years in the making, and many of the ideas presented here have been developed and refined in talks with clients and colleagues. I have also discussed *Leadership* for some years now with my students at the Technical University Berlin and the Berlin School of Economics and Law.

Leading When You're Not the Boss is written for three audiences: First and foremost, it is written for business leaders around the world. Second, it is written for anyone seeking meaningful work in large organizations. Finding meaningful work not only is a matter of discovery, it also is a matter of creation. Regardless of where we stand in the organization, each and every one of us can contribute to a leadership culture in which personal growth benefits the whole enterprise, and vice versa. And finally, the book is written for academics, consultants, and practitioners interested in the topics of human resources, organizational design, and the future of work.

—Berlin, Germany, November 2015

Zombies at the Workplace

I will never forget the first interviews I conducted as an internal auditor in the US service department of a global software company. We spoke to employees on three hierarchy levels: to call center agents, to first-line managers, and to the Vice President of Services. The VP was eager to explain the long-term business strategy to us, and the first-line managers discussed resource and scheduling issues, costs, and so on. However, it was the call center agent interviews that fascinated me most and stuck in my mind. These colleagues looked at us auditors as if we came from outer space. They did not seem to comprehend most of our questions, much less answer them. Time and again, we heard: "They don't tell us these things." "Who are 'they?'", I asked. The answer was: "Management."

To me, these call center agents appeared like zombies—seemingly alive, but dead inside. We do not want to pass judgement on people's interests or abilities. Everyone is different, and for some individuals, acquiring and retaining a simple job in which to execute routines may be a success and all they want or can hope to achieve. But the vast majority of employees are capable of so much more, and using only a fraction of the workforce's ability to create value actually is a waste of company resources.

How can we foster people's ability to create value? How can we enable front-line employees to tackle work problems where they arise: in daily operations, along the value chain, at the interface of (internal) supplier and (internal) client?

Crises and Change

Today, these questions are more pressing than ever. We live in a world of constant change. In the past century, more people have been born and more inventions made than in all the previous millennia of human history. Species are becoming extinct at such an accelerated rate that we are very likely in a period of mass extinction. The Great Recession following the financial crisis in 2007–2008 has deepened the economic divide not only between nations, but also within single countries. US republicans and democrats are fighting bitterly over state finances, healthcare, and welfare costs, and the perceived segregation of Western societies in 1% "rich" and 99% "others" bears a high risk for social unrest.

In the Euro Zone, the near-bankruptcy of small countries like Greece and Cyprus, and the huge state deficits even in large Euro members like France, Spain, and Italy not only reveal the conceptual flaw of a currency union without a unified banking system and a truly supra-national government. The financial crisis also revives the fundamental conflict in economic esprit: While encumbered countries call for a New Deal, arguing for a Keynesian policy of deficit spending, financially stable countries like Germany preach austerity and demand national reforms of inefficient government structures and costly social welfare systems.

In spite of nationalistic parties springing up in many European countries, most European politicians and populations are still willing to bail out struggling Euro member states and to move forward toward more political integration. The export world champion Germany, for instance, has benefited tremendously from the unified European market and the Euro zone, and it also stands to lose the most from its disintegration. The current Euro crisis is more a political crisis than an economic one. The European vision is much larger than the Euro. After centuries of war, the European Union has enabled 28 sovereign nation states with their own language and culture to coexist peacefully for over 50 years. It remains to be seen if Europe really possesses the political will to save the Euro zone from disintegration.

Meanwhile, the strong economic growth of the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa) during the last decades indicates that trade and global markets offer big opportunities for everybody. Globalization will continue to increase the standard of living for billions of people in emerging economies and, at least in the long run, is likely to lead to a democratization of authoritarian states like Russia and China, because the upcoming middle classes will not remain satisfied with economic success and will start demanding more political rights. As always in human history, though, the same technological advancement and globalization that leads to the economic rise of some professions and social groups will also lead to the descent of other professions and groups. When the automobile arrived, coachmen lost their jobs, and the same happened to secretaries at the advent of the personal