

Without a Word

This is an article about leadership, innovation, and the relationship between the two in German business today. It is also about Germany and its past, since it is not possible to discuss leadership (or almost anything else) in Germany in 1998 without reference to Germany in the 1930's and 40's.

THE FORBIDDEN WORD

Almost from the beginning of his/her regime, Adolf Hitler attempted to make leadership in Germany a private matter, to the point of attempting to reserve the use of the word *Führer* for himself alone. In 1942, Hitler eliminated the title Reichskanzler from the official lexicon since it implied that the Reichskanzler, as head of government, had a head of state to whom he was answerable (Hitler had already merged the office of Reichspräsident with that of chancellor, effectively eliminating the head of state). Much better, he said, would be the term *Führer*, "which in the future would be elevated to a unique term."¹ In 1943 Hitler ordered measures to eliminate the term "Führer" from official language in any contexts and compound words that did not refer to himself. Following this order, Martin Bormann and Lammers, heads of the Chancellery, ordered a compilation of common compound words in general language usage. The task of compiling this list fell to a Dr. Ficker.

Ficker created an exhaustive list of compounds ranging from government usage to usages in the Hitler Jugend, to the army and SA, trade associations, business, and daily life, including uses in the senses of group leader (*Gruppenführer*), guide (*Opernführer*), and conductor (*Bahnführer*) as well as its use with prefixes as in gang leader (*Anführer*) and seducer (*Verführer*). Ficker concluded that it was impossible to eliminate all the uses of the word or to restrict the use of the term and its conjugates to Hitler. *Führung* and all its related words were simply too rich and too integral in the language to be co-opted in this way. In his/her history of the period, Prof. Rebentisch describes the tone of Ficker's rather courageous report as "dripping with ridicule," and the two Chancellery heads dropped the idea of attempting to influence the use of the term *Führer* in everyday language, although terms containing the term were avoided in official documents. Even the Nazis could not control the German language to the extent of stripping it of such an old and rich word².

Modern Germany has succeeded where Hitler and the Nazis failed. The term *Führer* and the most powerful forms of the root word *führen* are now tacitly, but effectively, forbidden from use except in the most innocuous compounds. Words such as *Leiter* have been brought from obscurity to take the place of *Führer*, and words such as *Manager* have been borrowed from English without regard for their lack of provenance in German. It is the thesis of this article that this change is far from trivial or "merely linguistic," but rather it has had a profound effect on German thinking and particularly on the matter of innovation in German business and industry.

"SPRACHE IST DAS HAUS DES SEINS"

The philosopher Martin Heidegger said in his/her Letter on Humanism:

¹ Rebentisch, Dieter, *Führerstaat und Verwaltung in der zweiten Weltkrieg*, p.

² According to Duden, the word *führen* derives from an old Germanic "cause-word" (*Veranlassungswort*) with *fahren*, "to cause to go" or to set in motion, to determine the direction (*leiten, die Richtung bestimmen*). So a leader is one who puts things in motion and determines the direction.

Language is the house of being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of being insofar as they bring the manifestation to language and maintain it through their speech.

Heidegger is saying that our language, what we say and how we listen (both to ourselves and to others) determines who we are and shapes both our internal culture (our psychology) and the larger cultures in which we live. If we take Heidegger's view seriously, then we must ponder the implications of a culture that eschews in language the term "Leader" and we must ask how the weakening or elimination of this term affects that culture, particularly in areas such as business where, elsewhere in the world, leadership has come to be seen as essential in the modern business environment. If we take the case that innovation is a function of leadership, then the question becomes a serious one indeed.

There is general agreement in German government and business circles that innovation is German industry's greatest weakness and therefore Germany's greatest need. Once Germany's greatest strength, innovation has become its greatest problem. If innovation is a function of leadership, and if the tragedy of the Second World War and the horrors of the Nazi regime, followed by the German people's and the world's sensitivity to anything in the post-war era that might seem a resurgence of Nazism, has caused leadership to be weakened, attenuated, and hidden, then it would be no surprise that innovation has been suppressed along with leadership, as Germany has become a culture in which leadership is taboo.

INNOVATION AS A FUNCTION OF LEADERSHIP

To understand the view that innovation and leadership are linked, it is necessary to define the difference between leadership and management. The task of management is *stewardship*. Stewardship is the management of another's property, finances, or other affairs. The job of a steward is to work with assets, products and process that exist in the present time; to safeguard them, improve them, and make them more effective and efficient. Thus the area of concern of management is the present and the past, since improvement must always look to the past to determine what *was* as the basis for assessing what *is* as an improved product.

The task of leadership on the other hand is *creation*. Leadership is the creation and communication of futures that are not an extension or continuation of the past. Thus innovation cannot come from management, but only from leadership. Leadership must work in partnership with management to implement the futures that leadership envisions, but without leadership's vision there will be no innovation.

THE THREE PILLARS OF LEADERSHIP

To fully understand leadership as we are proposing it here, we must understand the three basic pillars on which leadership stands: Vision (Vorhaben), Service (Dienen), and Basic Trust (Urvertrauen),

Vorhaben: As we have said, leadership concerns itself with innovation, with the future, i.e., with that which does not yet exist. As such, we say that leadership's chief concerns are with vision and strategy (Vorhaben und Vorgehensweise). Vorhaben, like Urvertrauen, is not a description of some state or circumstance that already exists. (We could say that earned trust is a description of some internal state or feeling we have or of our experience with the person in question. Urvertrauen, however, has no referent other than the word or commitment of the person granting it). Vorhaben is not the description of a predicted future. That which is predictable from the past and present could be said to live in the realm of what now exists (by extrapolation), and thus belongs to management. True vision is the creation, at first in language and then in action, of a future that does not live in the results of the past and present, or even in any future that could be extended from the past and present. True vision begins with someone speaking ("ich habe das vor"). For example, when John F. Kennedy said, in 1963 (?) that the United States would send a man to the Moon and bring him back safely by the end of the decade of the '60's, there was nothing in the past or present circumstances that made such a statement reasonable or predictable. The technology did not exist, the means did not exist, there was no space program - all this came after the commitment to the vision of a man on the moon, not before. Vision provides the possibility or the field in which actions can be taken. Vision without action is dreaming, but action without vision is merely going through motions. One view of vision is that "Vision is having an acute sense of the possible. It is seeing what others don't see. And when those with similar vision are drawn together, something extraordinary occurs³."

Dienen: In the traditional models of leadership, leaders lead and the rest of us follow. Leadership in this model (which we believe is outdated) is a function of superiority and authority – leaders lead and the rest of us follow. In German culture in particular, leadership, authority, and position in the organization hierarchy are so indistinct as to be seen as aspects of the same thing. This model of leadership gives rise to command and control, bureaucracy and very slow decision-making processes. In more modern business thinking, leadership can arise from anywhere in the organization, regardless of position and authority, and leaders lead by virtue of (a) their creating a vision (b) their communicating that vision in such a way that inspires others to create the vision as their own and to join in its fulfillment and (c) their commitment to the fulfillment of the overall vision through each participant's fulfilling on their own personal vision. Put another way, today's greatest leaders are characterized by their commitment to the commitments of those they "lead," i.e., by their commitment to serving their vision and the visions of those around them. In this formulation, leadership and authority are unrelated, as are leadership and position in the organization. Anyone with a vision can lead (within the larger field of the organizational vision), and leadership is a function of communicating their vision in such a way that others are inspired and move into action. This removes the meaning of subordination or servility from "service."

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Urvertrauen: Leadership and management require different relationships of trust. One of these relationships, earned trust, is familiar to us. The other, basic trust, is less familiar. The first kind of trust, as its name indicates, is earned and therefore variable. It may be increased or decreased by deeds or by circumstances. We may trust a friend who has been consistent in keeping his/her promises or we may trust a business that performs to a high standard of quality. We may also trust without direct experience – when we go to a doctor who was recommended to us by a friend or another doctor, we grant the new doctor a degree of trust even though we do not know the doctor personally, because of the recommendation and because of the diplomas and certificates on his/her wall. In either case, earned trust is based on the past, whether on past deeds or on titles that were earned for past deeds and accomplishments. Basic trust is quite different from earned trust. The most striking difference is that basic trust is non-contingent and non-transactional. That is, basic trust is not established or affected by deeds or by circumstances, and is granted on an all-or-none basis. Basic trust could be said, therefore, to be non-rational, but neither is it emotional. Basic trust is a *commitment*; it is given by one's word, and it is absolute. When one grants basic trust, one is saying that the other person's deeds and mistakes will be seen in the context that they are trusted, and acts that seem to be inconsistent with their commitments or promises will be held as mistakes rather than as occasions for a withdrawal of trust. Basic trust could be said to require an act of faith; it creates a playing field of great freedom but also great responsibility.

LEADERSHIP IN GERMANY TODAY

This is one of the critical problems with leadership in Germany. Hitler and the Nazi regime offered a grotesque caricature of these three essentials of leadership and then did a brilliant job of convincing the German people (and others) that they were actually fulfilling on them. In place of basic trust, the Nazis brought charisma and great authority to a people broken by the First World War and the depression that followed it, and managed to garner for themselves in the place of true trust, blind obedience and followership. In place of a vision of a new future, Hitler and the Nazis offered to this blind obedience a future that was completely rooted in the past, real and imagined, and offered a compensation for that past. In place of a government and leadership that served the people, the regime again offered authority and obedience. In short, what the Nazis offered and mid-century Germany accepted was a degenerate form of leadership that brought the nation to shame and ruin.

Like a person who has been fleeced in a confidence game and loses his/her trust in humanity forever, Germany has never recovered. The country that had produced some of the world's greatest leaders and innovators in commerce, science, technology, and in political and military affairs, has never recovered its place in the world's leadership even fifty years after the Nazi regime was decisively defeated and discredited. To understand why this is so, we need only look back to Heidegger's maxim "Sprache ist das Haus des Seins." The experience of Germany and the German people with leadership has led them to expunge leadership from most of their language and, if we believe Heidegger, from their being as well. Consider some of the basic vocabulary of leadership:

- leadership
- vision
- commitment
- trust
- breakthrough
- management

Nowhere in German do we find words that convey what these words convey in business today in the rest of the world. Even where these words are used, they are borrowed from English, or the German "equivalents" do not convey the meaning that the English words communicate.

For example, *commitment*. In my company's consulting work with organizations we define commitment as "any conversation that creates a future that would not have happened without the conversation." This definition brings with it a sense of freedom and openness, of creation and innovation. I keep in my office in the US a Cassell's German Dictionary and a Barron's "Talking Business in German." Cassell's defines commitment in German first as *Verhaftung*, then as *Einlieferung* Barron's, in the business context, defines commitment as *Verpflichtung*. By contrast, the Oxford English Dictionary has as its first definition of commitment "the action of entrusting, giving in charge, or commending." Evoking basic trust, this definition is a far cry from *Verpflichtung*.

As another example, *vision*. The German Duden acknowledges the annexation of the word to Middle-High German from the Latin *visio* and translates it as *das Sehen, der Anblick, and die Erscheinung*, all of which cast vision with reference to description of what is there. The closest we find in German to vision with reference to what is not there is *das Trugbild*. By contrast, the English definitions are: 1. *Something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight; esp. an appearance of a prophetic or mystical character, or having the nature of a revelation.* 2. *A mental concept of a distinct or vivid kind; an object of mental contemplation, esp. of an attractive or fantastic character; a highly imaginative scheme or anticipation.* 3. *The action or fact of seeing or contemplating something not actually present to the eye.* 4. *Ability to conceive what might be attempted or achieved, esp. in the realm of politics; statesmanlike foresight.*

These examples suggest that there is no "Haus des Seins" in German culture/language/thinking for a language that would make possible the kind of leadership that allow for innovation, creativity and freedom. It is my contention that the revival of obscure words in German and the importation of currently fashionable terms from English will not create a "Haus des Seins" in German culture. It is only when it is permissible to think and speak leadership that a language of leadership will develop.

In our work with organizations on breakthrough, innovation and creativity, we have determined that the factors we have been discussing are inextricably tied with leadership. Management is a critical competency in any organization, and must be present for the organization to be commercially viable, but management will not create futures that go beyond the bounds of what has been and is now known. Management may be brilliant at extending and expanding what is now known, but it will never innovate, it will never go beyond what has been and what can be developed from what has been.

Leadership, in turn, lives in a different world from management. Management lives in the world of feasibility, tools, techniques, technologies; leadership in the world of possibility, vision, communication, and ideas. Almost all of what makes up leadership's world is constituted by language. In Heidegger's terms, the world of leadership is the world of being, and the tools and technologies of leadership are the tools of language. Without a language for leadership, Germany will never be able to create beyond what now exists.

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR A GERMAN CULTURE OF LEADERSHIP?

I am an American, and as such it would be legitimate to say that I have no right even to address this issue to German business leaders in a German magazine. I am writing this article after discussing these matters with German clients, associates, and friends who have urged me in the strongest possible terms to write about these issues because they, as Germans, did not feel that they could or would be listened to if they did.

I am a Jew who grew up in the years of the Second World War and the revelations of the Holocaust. I have been working in Germany with German and international companies since 1992, and have had to work through my own feelings and cultural biases to do so. I have found Germany a very different place from the country I learned about as a child and even from the country I first visited in 1983, and I have formed a commitment to the German companies and business leaders with whom I have worked.

I have studied and worked with German Mittelstand businesses, large German companies, and international companies in their German branches and daughter companies. I have watched with interest the development of German culture and politics, and I have heard again and again from German executives that “someone must do something about innovation in Germany,” and “the government must show greater leadership.” The other commonly heard comment is that leadership cannot emerge in Germany until the world will forgive Germany for World War II, or that if there were to be a strong conversation for leadership in Germany today the world, still sensitized from the War and the Holocaust, would crush it out of fear. In either case, Germany must wait for the world’s permission to again foster leadership.

In 1813 the American Naval Hero Commodore Perry wrote to his/her commanding officer “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” A century and a half later the political cartoonist Walt Kelly had his/her character Pogo say “We have met the enemy and they is us.” With regard to leadership, I suggest that German business today finds itself in the latter position.

Germany is in dire need of leadership. Without a strong commitment to leadership on the part of German business, the German economy will continue to grow incrementally, with growth on the order of the current rate of 2.5 to 3 percent per year, but there will be no breakthroughs of the kind experienced in, for example, the US and Korean economies. Breakthroughs are a function of leadership and innovation. The arguments that German business must wait for leadership from the political sector or for the world to forgive and give permission are no longer viable.

Germany will not move forward *before* leadership stands forward in Germany, and leadership in Germany will not emerge first from any sector other than business leadership. German political leadership, attempting to cope with the myriad problems that exist in Germany today is too attenuated and too divided to create a future. Institutionalized religion and Academics have proven again and again that they are incapable of creating a compelling case for new futures. In every country where new futures are being created it is the business sector that is creating them, and creating them without anyone’s permission and without any strong demand for them. They are creating these new futures because, as leaders, that is what there is for them to do.

German business has the greatest stake in the game of an economic breakthrough and it is from German business, both the Mittelstand and the large organizations, that the leadership must come. German business people must give up waiting for permission and take on the creation of a new culture of leadership in their organizations, in the Germany nation, and in world business.

And so I say it is time for a change in the thinking and culture of German business as regards leadership. It is time for German business to dare to have leaders. Not only to speak of leadership openly and freely, but to embrace leadership and to be willing to speak of new futures without fear that the world may rise up against them in fear of a new Reich. The world may react, in fact it probably will react, but if and when it does, it will be the job of

this new German leadership culture to communicate its vision and the future it is creating in such a way that the world finds its own vision in the vision of a renewed, creative Germany.

It will not be enough for Germany to take the stand that its past is in the past and that it has the right and responsibility to create a new future. Ultimately the world will have to make that commitment as well and will have to move forward. Not to forget - neither the world nor Germany could or should forget the horrors of the Nazi regime - but to forgive and recognize that the Germany of the year 2000 is not the same country, the same people, or the same leadership (der selbe Reich, der selbe Volk, oder der selbe Führung) as the Germany of the year 1940.

So the call to German business leadership is: "Traut euch Führer zu sein." Create the vision of a future for Germany that accepts and acknowledges the past, builds on the successes of the past and learns from its failures and errors. Communicate that vision broadly - in your organizations, in Germany and in the world, and have the courage to stand for the future that you know is possible in the face of fear and ignorance, in the face of disbelief and disagreement, in the face of the naysayers and the disbelievers. Create your own completion and the world's forgiveness not by attempting to atone for the past but by designing a compelling new future in which Germany regains its place as leader and innovator.