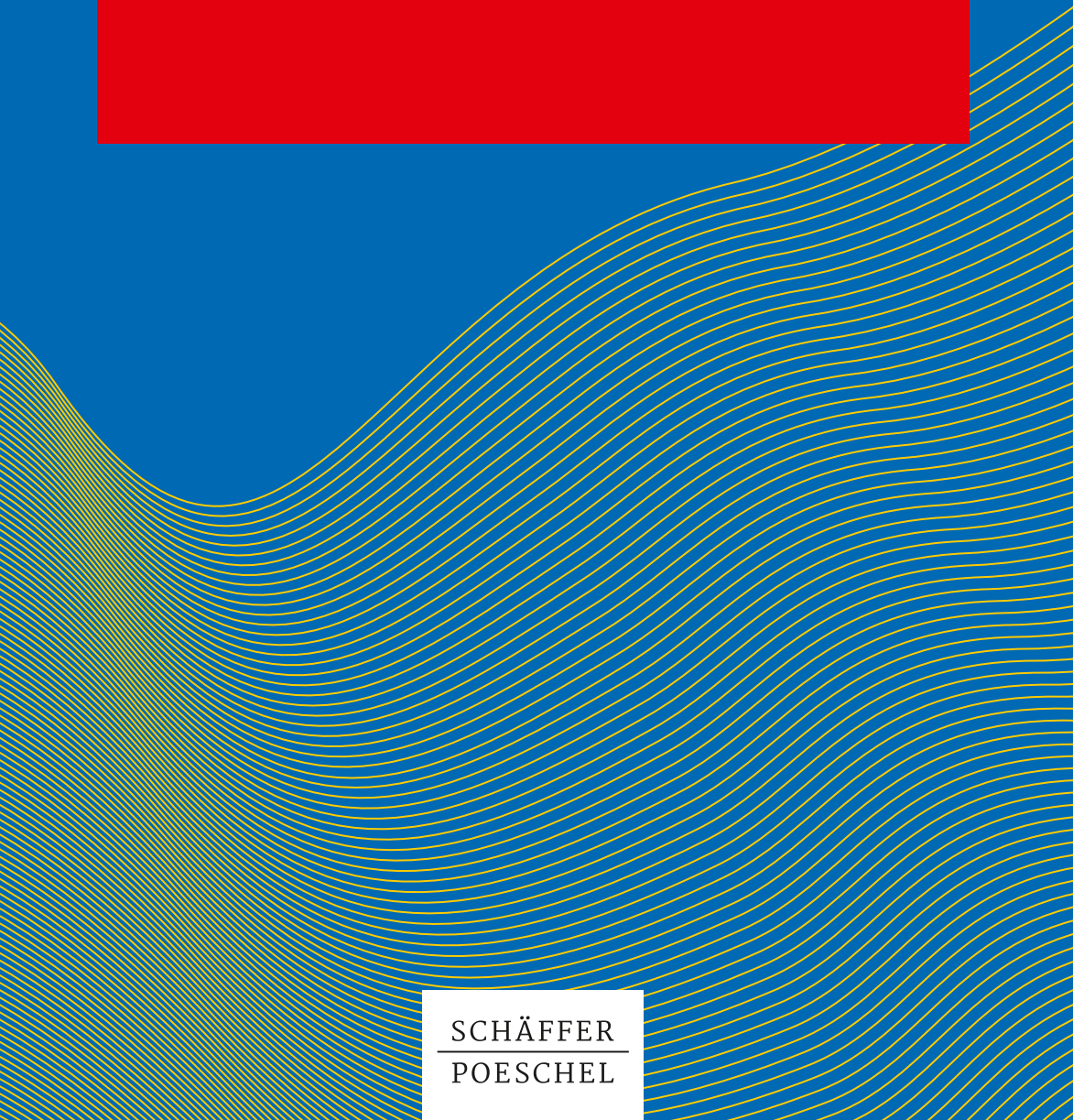
Ruth Seliger

Positive Leadership

The Management Revolution



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Preamble

»Positive Leadership is a powerful tool. As a manager, I am responsible for making good use of it. But I have no other means to lead my team to success.«

Wolfgang Braunböck is the Senior HR Director at Oracle. He leads an international team of approximately 45 employees in Eastern Europe, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and Africa.

Several years ago, Wolfgang Braunböck visited a training course on Positive Leadership which I was organising. Afterwards, he started implementing the principles of Positive Leadership consistently in his growing team.

»At first, it was a culture shock for me. School makes you focus on errors quite relentlessly. You are always bad at things and need to get better. It took me a long time to pay attention to strengths instead. I have started to look at what matches my own strengths. And now, I am doing the same with my employees.«

Wolfgang Braunböck's employees say that communication in the team has become more open and there is a greater amount of trust. Especially the younger employees from the former »Eastern Bloc« are prepared to go that extra mile if they feel appreciated.

»It was an eye-opener for me when I realised I had to change my way of communicating. Communication is the key factor. It took time at first, but it paid off.«

Wolfgang Braunböck selects employees on the basis of their strengths; he promotes lateral cooperation within and among the regions he manages. He organises his division around the strengths of his team. With his 32 direct reports, he regularly exchanges views on the bigger picture of the organisation and their common tasks. He bases his decisions on the following principles:

- Continuity and reliability / consistency
- Transparency and comprehensibility
- Trust / no micro-management

A large network of managers has formed around him; its establishment would have been impossible without Positive Leadership.

And Positive Leadership has changed him personally, too:

»I have become more open, more positive. I feel a lot more confident.«

My journey into the wide world of Positive Leadership started in May 2000. The two founders of Appreciative Inquiry, David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney, first presented their approach to the world in Europe during a five-day workshop attended by roughly 100 consultants from all over the globe. I remember spending three of the five days very sceptical: rose-tinted glasses, typical American white-washing, not systemic, one-sided optimism. Where was the balance?

But on the fourth morning, my head was suddenly bursting with new ideas. All of a sudden, I could think of thousands of opportunities to use this approach effectively. I was full of energy, optimism, and drive.

Back at work, I immediately started combing through my old concepts and documents and revising everything. My language changed, my work changed. It became lighter and more effective.

In 2007, I flew to the US to attend a large congress organised by David Cooperrider, who gathered »the field« together for the first time: Martin Seligman, the »father« of positive psychology, Marcus Buckingham, one of the designers of »strength-based management«, and many practitioners presented their concepts and experiences. I had the opportunity to introduce one of my own projects during a workshop. The congress made me realise that something great was happening here – greater than Appreciative Inquiry. Renowned universities all over the world have been researching this topic for years; a lot has been published and implemented. The notion of a radical use of resources is growing and developing. A new movement has emerged – a large, new field. It is a change in paradigm that is taking place in all fields of science and practice and finding its way into organisations and management levels.

For my »Jungle Book of Leadership«, I attached great importance to introducing a clearly structured model for systemic leadership. The topic of Positive Leadership was only mentioned very briefly at the end of the book, however – a pointer indicating that there is a lot more to say still. In this book, I carry on where my Jungle Book stopped.

This book is an opportunity for me to provide a detailed introduction into the broad field of Positive Leadership. It is a journey to the many roots, concepts, and instruments that come with a new understanding of leadership and organisations. It is based on a new worldview and a new idea of what it means to be human – beyond morality, but within an ethical framework.

For me, Positive Leadership is a systematic developmental stage of systemic thinking as applied to leadership. The systemic principles and fundamental assumptions, the image

of humans and the world, the understanding of organisation all constitute the basis for Positive Leadership. Positive Leadership is neither flowery nor esoteric. It is a path that shows how leadership will shape the organisations of the future.

Just as I did in my Jungle Book, I promise not to talk about a lot of new things here. Many of my readers will already be familiar with a lot of the thoughts and instruments presented in this work. The book is an attempt to provide an interested audience with an overview of the tendencies that influence the field of Positive Leadership and to consolidate the many aspects and ideas of the notion that has become known as »Positive Leadership«. It raises no claim to completeness.

I am a down-to-earth practitioner of the theory. Over the course of the past years, I have explored the field in greater depth, developed methods and concepts, and passed on the virus of positivity to many people and organisations. First of all, I infected my own consultancy firm, which has since specialised in this approach in the context of leadership and change management. In my courses, I have led managers to the »positive« path. Increasing numbers of organisations asked me and my institute to align their courses to the concept of positive leadership. Our work in the field of processes is oriented consistently towards the principles of Positive Leadership.

This is what my book is about. It is intended to encourage its readers to take action. The largest section of the book offers a wide range of practical case studies that illustrate how the methods of Positive Leadership were implemented, and what results they achieved.

By writing this book, I wish to introduce managers and consultants to the topic of »Positive Leadership« and familiarise them with it. I wish to prompt them to consider a new approach to leadership, organisation, and change. You are warmly encouraged to copy, be inspired, or simply become curious.

My personal passion for the Positive Leadership approach is rooted in a very particular hope: that treating ourselves and the world with appreciation and respect may cause positive change in both. Leadership plays a particularly significant role here, and it carries great opportunities.

I would not have been able to write this book without help. Many people have contributed to its completion: Matthias zur Bonsen, with whom I share a long history of cooperation and who has brought David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney to Riccione (Italy), David and Diana themselves, as they have been invaluable teachers and guides to me, my colleague Christof Schmitz, who continuously gives me new impulses and keeps his eye on

the topic with me, my colleagues in my company, who have been working with me on the development of this topic and field for many years, and last, but not least, my customers, who have become so enthusiastic about this topic. They have offered me opportunities to learn, try out the concept and its instruments in practice, and develop it further.

Vienna, March 2017.
Ruth Seliger

Content

Part 1: Conceptual and methodological foundations

1 The paradigm shift

»*For two thousand years, humanity has believed that the sun and all of the stars of heaven turned around it. The Pope, the cardinals, the princes, the scholars, captains, merchants, fishwives, and pupils believed that they were sitting inside this crystal sphere, motionless. But now we emerge, Andrea, at full speed. The olden days are over, and a new time has come.*«
Bertolt Brecht: Galileo Galilei[1]

A Paradigm is a comprehensive view of the world that is prevalent within a society and determines the thought and action of its people. Paradigms are composed of a multitude of assumptions, explanations and principles, which we use for orientation on a daily basis. This is how paradigms guide our thought and our emotion, our perceptions and explanations, and – above all – the behaviour of the people who make up a society. They are passed down from generation to generation, connecting people within a »paradigmatic community« sharing a view of the world that is never questioned. A paradigm is like the grammar of a language: you do not think about it, yet you use it; you think and speak with it and in it. It is difficult to recognise a paradigm – it is a blind spot, and we normally only notice it when it changes.

Paradigms predominantly consist of explanatory models of the world, which are enshrined deeply inside our collective consciousness. We only abandon them when they reach a limit and, thus, lose their primary explanatory function to humankind, or when they are replaced with more recent insights. The paradigm of the Middle Ages and the Catholic Church, for instance, which claimed that the Earth was the centre of the universe, was only invalidated and ousted from its predominant position as the natural science developed and we became capable of observing planets through telescopes.

We are at such a turning point today.

And like most major processes of change, this present paradigm shift brings different speeds, conflicts, and crises with it. We are experiencing this critical flux in different forms and with different contents: as a financial crisis, a crisis of democracy or trust, social disintegration and a widespread crisis of values, an ecological crisis, or a social cri-

1 Brecht 1988, p. 10.

sis. Experts have long been speaking of a »systemic« crisis: all of these crises are closely interconnected; they affect one another and cannot be solved in isolation.

Anyone following the media coverage diligently enough may well become overwhelmed with this »crisis hypnosis« and be driven to despair. But we would not be speaking of a »shift« if the »crisis« and the »dying paradigm« had given rise to the first signs of a new worldview, a new understanding of what it means to be human and live a human life – notions that are slowly gaining momentum.

Jeremy Rifkin, brilliant mastermind and political consultant, has interpreted our era as the »third industrial revolution«.

> »We are in the middle of a far-reaching change of social structures that is dismantling hierarchies in favour of a lateral distribution of power.«[2]

We can interpret Rifkin's words as a 90-degree rotation of our worldview: from a *vertical* (hierarchic) to a *horizontal* (cooperative) order, but also as a shift from a *differentiating* to an *integrative* worldview. Having turned your point of view by 90 degrees, it is easy to visualise how extensively our world is changing.

Such profound changes take time, and they are terrifying. But do not worry – we have done this before. The paradigm shift currently underway is not the first of its kind, and it will not be the last.

1.1 The worldview of modernity

A look back in history will show us that such processes are a part of human society. Each of us know that the world has changed over the centuries; nevertheless, we believe that things will remain as they are, that our worldview will prevail. And we collectively forget the crises that accompanied earlier paradigm shifts.

Our current paradigm is characterised by the scientific-technological worldview of »modernity«, i.e. of the 15th and 16th centuries: an era that ended one thousand and five hundred years of dominance of the Catholic Church over the (European) world, replacing it with insights from the new sciences and technology. When Galileo Galilei gazed through a telescope in 1610, observing the motion of the planets and recognising that it was, in

2 Rifkin 2011, p. 48.

fact, the Earth that turns around the sun and not vice versa, the ecclesiastical worldview of the Earth as the centre of the universe suddenly collapsed. But it took many more centuries and battles until this paradigm was finally buried once and for all.

From this point, not only the paradigm of the Earth-centric universe collapsed – the new worldview changed considerably more. It was the beginning of the dominion of science as the driving force behind our explanation of the world. The renunciation of »faith« and its replacement with a scientific view of the world, referred to as »knowledge«, was a paradigmatic earthquake. Brecht leaves the description of this shift to Galileo Galilei:

> »A great enthusiasm has emerged to explore the origin of all things: why the stone drops when it is released, and how it rises when it is thrown. New discoveries are made by the day.«[3]

After centuries of dominance by the Church and its faith, physics, mathematics, and technology ultimately assumed the leading role in the conceptualisation of the world. These disciplines examined it with a »factual«, »objective« approach; humanity attempted to understand the world in rational terms by observing it, cutting it into small pieces, analysing the pieces, and finally putting them back together. Increasingly powerful technological possibilities were developed in order to investigate increasingly minuscule elements of our world. This was based on the assumption of an ultimate core element that needed to be found and discovered in order for us to understand the bigger picture that makes up our universe.

New values emerged: rationality, reason, and logic became the decisive foundation of the new worldview and the new social principles. Simultaneously, the methodology of scientific research became a part of our worldview and our reality.

> Its differentiating and dividing, lacerating and reassembling, its precise examination of all parts of a whole still constitute the basis of our approach to the world, to problems, to solutions.

Our world has been designed around those notions: science has been divided into faculties specialising in their own topics of research. Knowledge has been divided into »subjects«, learning at school into units of fifty minutes. Our hospitals have become departments for individual components of the human body, our work processes are clearly separated, our lives are split neatly into work and life, and we must strive to »balance« the two at all costs. We have created a world of »objectivity« and »differentiation«, and

3 Brecht 1988, p. 11.

we are surrounded by it on a daily basis; it permanently reflects and confirms our thought processes. It is no longer imaginable that the world could be, or become, different.

The primary function of every paradigm is, on the one hand, to provide us with explanations for the great questions of our time: How did the world come into being? Where do we all go? Its second use is to simplify the world for us and portray it in a more accessible light. Much like the medieval paradigm, the worldview of modernity was aimed at simplification and the reduction of complexity in order to give humans guidance. Science was to provide explicit, clear insights and objective truths, which had been the domain of the Church until then. The idea emerged that it was possible to observe the world as an »objective item«, i.e. an object that was independent of its observer, and make statements about it. The »truth« of the Church was therefore confronted with a new, »scientific truth«.

This new »faith« in »objectiveness«, in »reason« and »the one, singular truth« has remained part of our culture to the present day. It dominates our science, our worldview, our actions, our values.

The core motivation of science, however, was its attempt to predict the future by means of »comprehension« in order to ultimately control the world.

»Newton's laws of celestial mechanics and Descartes' coordinates, which enabled scientists to imagine the world as a vast network, gave rise to the impression that everything was explicable in mathematical and mechanical terms. At the time of Napoleon, the French physicist Pierre Laplace could seriously imagine that scientists might one day find a single mathematical equation that would be powerful enough to explain everything.«[4]

The paradigm of modernity, like that of the Catholic Middle Ages, was rooted in the idea of a *stable world order*. It was this notion that allowed science to formulate new, apparently eternally applicable »laws of nature« and embark on a quest for a »world formula« that would explain everything.

Our capacity for differentiating and analysing, which is supported by increasingly powerful technologies, has heightened our awareness since the beginning of modernity and greatly enhanced our knowledge of the world. Unfortunately, however, our love for discernment has also made us lose sight of contexts. Simultaneously, the paradigm of modernity has brought us the illusion of an »objective truth« and led us to believe that

4 Briggs/Peat 1990, p. 25.

we can simplify a complex world. The central elements of the scientific-technological paradigm are based on »doctrines«:

- the possibility of understanding the world by means of observation and analysis, for instance,
- or the idea that we can make »objective« statements about it,
- the notion of a rigid world order that is reflected in the laws of nature,
- the concept of unequivocal sequences of cause and effect as an explanatory model for all of life's processes, and finally,
- the belief in a hierarchical structure of the world, ranging from its most primitive creatures to the supreme being (God).

These assumptions have been all but uprooted over the past decades. Today, we are dealing with a degree of complexity that does not tolerate such simplifications. Attempts to disentangle complicated matters in this way tend to fail nowadays.

1.2 The transition to postmodernism

Surprisingly, the shift from the scientific to the new, postmodern paradigm was initiated by those sciences that had caused the former: physics and mathematics.

The natural sciences worked on the assumption of a stable, predictable, analysable worldview. Newton's laws illustrate this approach:

> »Any object in a state of uniform motion remains in that state of motion unless an external force is applied to it; the acceleration of a moving object is directly proportional to the force applied to it, and it will follow the uniform direction in which the force is applied; for every action, there is an equal and opposite re-action.«[5]

The French mathematician Henri Poincaré questioned Newton's law of universal gravitation – a linear equation with which to calculate the orbit of the Moon around the Earth – by introducing an additional variable that could impact on this orbit, such as the influence of the Sun. He proved that the mere addition of one single variable rendered Newton's equations insoluble: it only worked under stable, reduced conditions (two factors). This »discovery« shook the foundations of traditional physics and mathematics. It soon became clear that our world was unpredictable once we introduced further variables: their reciprocal effects could no longer be calculated with any degree of certainty.

5 Isaac Newton, as quoted by Rifkin 2011, p. 209 f.

»Poincaré had thrown an anarchistic bomb into Newton's model of the solar system, threatening to blow it up. If these strange, chaotic paths were truly there, the entire solar system would be unstable.«[6]

Poincaré's discovery changed science completely and became the kindling for what we refer to as the paradigm of »postmodernism« today (we can only hope to find a better name eventually).

»Poincaré revealed that chaos or the potential for chaos is a characteristic of non-linear systems, and that even a completely pre-determined system such as that of the orbiting planets can produce uncertain results. He had caught a glimpse of a simple system transitioning to shocking levels of complexity in an explosive process.«[7]

Poincaré's work became the foundation and cornerstone of modern quantum physics and Einstein's theory of relativity. Ultimately, Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle radically questioned the possibility of measuring »reality« in its entirety: his research showed that light sometimes appeared to consist of particles, sometimes of waves, depending of the observation conditions.

But the scientific-technological paradigm left a deep impact on the world and our way of thinking. Gerald Hüther, neurobiologist, explains:

»What started at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment as an epiphany about the possibility of investigating orderly, natural relationships and, as a result, shaping the living environment around us has become a key element of our self-perception. We are convinced that we can comprehend the external world and mould it according to our ideas. But now that we have discovered, exploited, and largely exhausted scores of natural resources, deciphered the genome, split the most minuscule particles, and illuminated the cosmos all the way back to the Big Bang, we are slowly realising that we might require a second age of enlightenment, so to speak, if we wish to solve the problems which we have brought upon ourselves by using raw reason only, and to which we are exposed on a daily basis thanks to the global means of communication available to us today.«[8]

This »second age of enlightenment«, the new paradigm, will quite probably feature phenomena of network, integration, and interconnection; it will illuminate new approaches to complexity and opportunities for accepting our world as a living organism full of unpredictability and surprise.

6 Briggs/Peat 1990, p. 36.
7 Briggs/Peat 1990, p. 27.
8 Hüther 2008, p. 25 f.