

Agile leadersheep

*the strength of the herd is in the sheep
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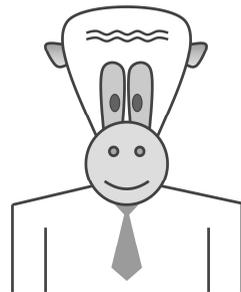
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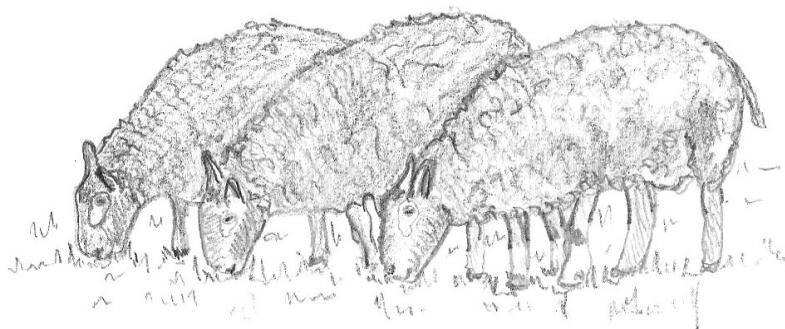
Preface

Leadership is a hot item and rightly so. For a long time the emphasis was on working according to the PDCA cycle with SMART formulated goals. In recent years, attention has focused on agile working and scrumming in self-managing teams. Meanwhile other new, fascinating roads are being taken. The question is how you inform your people about this. In the year 2019 this mainly happens online, but in our digital world there is still room for the management book. Every year, thousands of titles appear with theories and practical tips. It underlines the power of the written word, of the ideas recorded on paper. Reading remains fun and educational and for that matter fairy tales have the richest tradition.

Long before the first book appeared, people told each other stories with a message. Whether they are about witches, elves, gnomes or a naked emperor, the essence is simple: use your common sense. Do not take a free apple from a stranger, do not open the door to a wolf and do not fall for invisible clothing. That message is still up-to-date, also in the world of management gurus. So read their books, attend conferences and make sure you are aware of both the latest trends and the theories from the past. Then use your common sense and see what works for you and your organization, because a lot is possible but there is no must do.

That way you give and receive leadership happily ever after.

The herd of sheep



Once upon a time, there was a herd of sheep that lived in a beautiful, vast moorland. Dry parts with high sand dunes were interspersed with wet areas of moist bog and shallow marshes. The wealth of the flora and fauna was unrivaled. In the south, a pine forest gradually transformed into thickly-grown purple heather, which bordered on a continuously spraying sand plain with a number of centuries-old oak trees. Between the tall canes, heath, sundew and gale grew in the north, which formed the ideal breeding ground for water birds such as the curlew and the grebe.

The shepherd found it a privilege to walk around with his herd every day in this beautiful area and he took his job very seriously. On the door of the sheepfold he had nailed a sign on which the mission of his herd was written with ornate, golden letters:

Effective Grazing for a Better Biodiversity

It was his job to protect nature by allowing the cropping grass to be grazed before it could overrun the heath plants. The shepherd had a herd at his disposal for this task, which he was rightly proud of. The sheep gave wool and occasionally even meat, but that was unimportant. The point was that the heath was protected and expanded where possible.

The shepherd had a heart for his animals and treated them with respect. To this end he was assisted by Cody, his faithful shepherd dog. Cody was a border collie, who had followed a training in England at a renowned dog college. There he had

learned how to convey the wishes of the shepherd to the herd. The three most important principles were engraved in his memory: lead your sheep to the goal, hold them together and protect them from danger. Cody was true to his principles and that made him a sought-after sheepdog. After a short period as a helper on a petting zoo he ended up on the heath, where he really enjoyed working with the shepherd.

Under their inspiring leadership, the herd had a number of successful seasons with an annual growth of 3 to 5 percent in biodiversity. The area attracted more and more tourists, nature lovers and students who wanted to be shown around or went on a day trip with the herd. This did not go unnoticed and led to the ultimate recognition by the World Wildlife Fund, which classified the heathlands as a protected area and added the recommendation to declare them a national park. National politics had responded positively and a final decision could be made at any time. So it was important not to make any mistakes and to ensure that the moorland was always well cared for.

It put pressure on the shepherd, who did everything to keep the stress that this entailed away from the herd. The sheep did not know any better than that they were brought to a place by Cody every day to fill their bellies with the green grass. They had to leave the heath and that was no problem, because they did not like the bitter taste and woody structure of the purple plants.

The sheep knew they had to eat at a strong pace to get rid of all the grass in time. Without exception, however, they loved their work and were happy to take an extra bite. Occasionally Cody growled encouragingly as the grain rate

decreased and then the number of bites per second went up again.

Keeping the heath healthy was a team effort and every sheep was convinced that the beautiful life in the herd would never pass if they kept doing their best together. And with that positive attitude everyone started the new season in good spirits.

It was a beautiful spring day. It was drizzling and a bleak westerly wind was blowing over the heath. Hugo cheerfully walked through the half-high grass. He felt strong and full of energy. That had been quite different yesterday. Then the sun shone and he had looked for the shade to cool off. Almost the entire herd had stood under the trees and at the end of the day the sheep had hardly grazed. This had made Cody nervous, because now they ran behind on the grazing plan early in the season. He had growled to drive the sheep together and had gone to sleep without saying anything. But today he turned his familiar, cheerful rounds around the herd again.

‘You are doing well,’ Cody barked. ‘Real teamwork, keep it up, then we will finish eating sector A, area 12 completely.’

He ran past Hugo at full speed, made a sharp right turn without slowing and disappeared from sight. Hugo looked at him with a smile. He liked to see Cody feeling comfortable and confident. They were fortunate to have such a dog. He barked, but rarely, if ever, bit and if you had problems, you could always turn to him. For him you grazed a little longer and that was exactly what Hugo had planned for today. He took a big bite and felt the thick drops of the wet blades of grass on his tongue. It was juicy and had a good bite, soft inside and crunchy on the outside. It was young and actually a bit too short, but only a grumbler would pay attention to that. Hugo chewed with taste, swallowed and took another bite.

'Do you leave something for us?' a cheerful voice sounded behind him. 'You are not the only sheep here.'

Hugo turned and looked straight into the dark eyes of Lara, a beautiful ewe with a snow-white coat, thin legs and the most beautiful little ears he had ever seen.

'Don't worry,' Hugo grinned. 'Today we have to eat the grass all the way up to the fallen birch. If that succeeds, then your four stomachs will also be full.'

He took another bite and chewed, his head turned back to the ground. Without realizing it he had caught a tuft of grass with a good amount of sand.

'Yuck,' Hugo grunted, and he spat the grass on the ground.

'What is it?' Lara asked anxiously.

'I have sand between my teeth.'

'Then you should not take such big bites.'

'That's not what it's about,' Hugo protested. 'We have to eat fast and where we are now that is not possible. The grass is too young.'

'You're right,' Lara admitted, now that she became aware of her own teeth grating. 'We may be more fortunate tomorrow.'

Hugo nodded, but did not really agree. The grazing plan should be such that it was not a matter of luck if you were eating the best grass. Lost in thought he grazed on and choked when he got a great idea. Coughing and spluttering, he spat his last bite on the floor. That worked out well, because like any sheep he knew it was not polite to bleat with a full mouth.

'I found it,' he called to Lara.

'What have you found?'

'A way in which we can eat more grass and it will taste even better.'

'What do you mean?' Lara asked cautiously.

She had known Hugo for a long time. He often came up with new ideas that no other sheep had thought of.

'Look around you,' Hugo said. 'This grass is young and is only just starting to grow well.'

'Indeed, it's still short.'

'Right. And now take a good look. 'Hugo pointed his nose to the south side of a sand hill. 'Over there the blades are slightly higher than here. And do you see the strip of grass next to that oak? That is at least half an inch longer than where we are now.'

'You're right,' Lara said in amazement. 'That grass is indeed greener. We're going to go there in a week's time, according to schedule.'

'That's right, but then it will have become tough and dehydrated. We have to go there now. We can maintain the heathland better if we always graze the grass that is beautifully green and juicy. Now we eat the shortest sprigs and we get sand between our teeth or we are chewing for hours on dried stems. We can do better, it's a question of will.'

'I don't know if it's that easy,' Lara thought aloud. 'Because if we go to the sand hill today, the grass near the oak will be longer tomorrow. Then we occasionally eat the greenest grass, and that's what we do now. I think it does not matter.'

'That's why we should not stay together with the whole herd. We need to split up into small groups every day looking for beautiful, fresh grass.'

'And what about the planning? We have to graze the entire heath, that's our job.'

'You will see that we can do it better. It is quite simple. We have to eat all the grass, right?'

Lara nodded.

'And all the grass consists of small sprigs first, then of juicy stalks, which eventually grow and dry out. The juicy grass is the tastiest and we eat it the fastest. So if we make sure that we always eat juicy grass, that's the best thing. Isn't that right?'

Lara shook her head.

'Doesn't finding the best grass take time?' she said in the belief that her best friend had missed something. 'Perhaps even more than what we win by grazing faster.'

'No, not if we approach it smartly. If we pay attention when we walk over the heath and remember where the grass is just not juicy enough, then we know where to go the next day. Trust me, this is going to work. Oh, I'm so curious to find out what the other sheep will say about it.'

Lara gave Hugo an encouraging boost. From experience she knew that the sheep were careful and wary of big changes. However, she did not want to temper his enthusiasm and was looking for a way to give the plan a chance. In most cases, new initiatives became a success if they were supported by Cody or, even better, by the shepherd.

'Why don't you tell Cody first?' Lara suggested. 'If he agrees to support your plan, then the rest will follow automatically.'

Hugo had his doubts. In the past, he succeeded a few times in convincing his dog of a small improvement plan. So, with Cody, you could surely bleat as long as you did not

come up with progressive ideas that threatened the grazing plan or went against his three principles.

‘I’m afraid our dog will not take this risk without first convincing himself that it works. And for that I need the help of all the sheep.’

Lara understood that she could not change her friend's mind.

‘I will support you,’ she said encouragingly. Because the thought that from now on she would be allowed to eat the juiciest grass every day was almost too good to be true.

It was Tuesday and like every week a few hours were reserved for ruminating together. If you felt like it, you could also ruminate at other times. You often did that with a small group of sheep, which took a maximum of half an hour. But the weekly session was a different matter. Attendance was mandatory for all sheep and it rarely, if ever happened that they were done earlier than planned. Hugo found it mostly boring and useless. This time, however, he saw it as an opportunity to explain his new idea to the herd.

Just before the sun reached its highest point, Cody started to round up the sheep. Dustin knew exactly what the intention was and was the first to quietly lie down in the grass. One by one, the other sheep followed suit until they formed an almost perfect circle and the ruminating could begin.

Theo, a slightly graying middle-aged sheep, took the lead. In a clearly audible way he chewed on a piece of grass that he had eaten on the low heath last week. Dustin followed his example with a tuft of dried hay from the shed and soon the entire herd was ruminating. The atmosphere was relaxed and everyone took his time. There was a serene calm, with in the background only the rustling of the leaves and the whistling of a few birds high in the air.

'Baa,' it suddenly sounded. It was Ray, who blurted it out for no apparent reason. After that it was quiet again. The sheep looked at each other ruminating. Then it got too much for Tiny.

'Baa-aa,' she yelled to her own surprise. The urge to respond to Ray's bleating apparently was too strong to resist.

'Baa-aa,' Dustin added in turn. And with that the ruminating got off to a good start. A mutually alternating, meaningless bleating sounded from every corner. The sheep felt good. It strengthened the we-feeling and gave them the idea that they were contributing something important to the herd.

Hugo just listened and waited for a good moment to explain his plan.

'Baa-aa,' he bleated when he got the chance. 'I have a new idea. Do you want to hear it?'

'Yes, of course,' Lara bleated. 'Please tell.'

Hugo took a look around and started talking. He enthusiastically spoke about his plan to start looking for fresh grass in small groups. He explained that grazing would be faster, more fun and that the grass would taste better. His speech lasted more than ten minutes and he was rightly proud of it when he concluded with an inviting, open question: 'Dear ewes and rams, now I'm curious about what you think.'

Full of hope he waited for the questions and statements of support that would follow. He had talked like that Brugsheep, but the only reaction he received was a sheepish look from his herd members, accompanied by the sound of their ruminating jaws. There was a silence that felt uncomfortable and lasted longer than normal. Cody also sensed it and intervened.

'Woof,' he barked. 'That was a nice speech Hugo, thank you. You see that there are no questions.'