

## ETHICS CAN MAKE US ILL

### THE MEDICAL CONSEQUENCES OF ETHICAL CONFLICTS IN THE WORKPLACE

In the following autobiographical contribution by Markus H, the scope and tragedy of 'deep-ethical dissonance' (Robinson, 2016) is presented in a particularly tangible form.

A person's 'deep-ethics' are, by definition, non-negotiable (see 'Interethical Competence', Robinson, 2014). Deep-ethics are the systems of hard-held values that constitute the very core of people's identity and their *manière d'être*.

It is not uncommon for an individual to possess more than one set of deep-ethics, which leads us to ask: What happens when – as a result of incidents in professional or private life – irreconcilable sets of deep-ethics clash not only between an individual and their external world, but also in their internal world, within their very identity?

The content of the following personal account is unique. At the same time, what happens here is anything but an isolated incident.

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#### Background

The beginning of the inner ethical conflicts

The body goes on strike

The feeling of hopelessness

The time in the psychiatric hospital

The release from the cocoon and the struggle to find my way back into everyday life.

The second admission into a clinic

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#### BACKGROUND

Immediately after my military training school, I was able to fulfil my dream of working in aviation as an aircraft mechanic in an international company. I had always set high standards for myself and achieved the goals I set, so here at this company and through putting in a lot of overtime I was able to rise steadily within the company. In the course of time, it became normal for me to never call it a day until the job was done. This meant that a lot of evenings and weekends were spent at work. The company became something like a surrogate family for me, partly due to the high level of cohesion which we had in the team and partly due to the fact that I was in the buildings most of the time anyway. It was me who almost never said no to an additional assignment and I was held in high esteem not only by customers and superiors, but

also by my colleagues. In 2002, I was able to complete a management qualifier programme and, in 2003, I was offered the opportunity to take over a branch with 90 employees as its general manager.

This branch was not in the best condition at that time. Previously, it had sometimes produced results that far exceeded the budget, but in recent years it had repeatedly produced deep red figures.

My predecessor was asked to leave after holding the position for 20 years.

Well, the first problem was that the costs were much too high due to an oversized overhead. My first task was to cut 10% of the staff. This caused me the first sleepless nights. It was very important to me that everyone got the support they needed to find a new job. In addition, I wanted to give them their notice in a personal meeting and not simply leave this task to the HR manager.

The second big problem was that one of our customers was generating around 70% of our annual sales and this represented a huge risk: 'too many eggs in one basket'. And, on top of that, this particular customer had been given certain special concessions which would cause me far more sleepless nights and nightmares as time progressed. There were almost no written records of these special business relationships and my predecessor, who could have shed light on these complicated constructs, had been silenced by the management.

The initial situation was as follows:

The customer owned several aircraft which were in a desolate condition due to their age, to frequent use and also to the climatic conditions in which the aircraft operated. Several major inspections were due, including repainting the aircraft and replacing the cabin interiors. The smallest orders were worth about half a million U.S. dollars, and the larger ones involved significantly more.

Another party "P" was involved in these affairs: this was a person who held high office in politics and who was under contract to receive 5% of the revenue from each order. Since I was new to this role, my supervisor thought it would be a good idea to schedule a meeting with all parties before we agreed on the first order under my management. On the customer side, the business manager was also new, which meant that only my supervisor and P knew the rule of this business arrangement.

The customer required a fixed quotation to be submitted within a week of the arrival of the aircraft. In addition, all the materials except for minor parts were to be supplied by the customer. There were no advance payments and the invoice would only be settled one to two months after delivery of the aircraft. Everything inside me said "No, leave it alone!" but I felt too new in the job to further jeopardise the company's precarious financial situation by eliminating its most important source of income. Besides, these were long-standing personal business relationships and I felt it was not my place to question them. Nevertheless, I told my boss that I had serious concerns. He then grilled me for two hours and also revealed to me that, in the past, these orders had brought in both unbelievable profits and disastrous losses.

As the new GM, I would now have to ensure that the excellent profits would be restored through applying my new management style.

After that, there was also a clandestine meeting between my boss, P and myself. Under no circumstances should I send the offer directly to the customer's business manager, but first to P so that he would have the opportunity to incorporate his demands. Of course, absolute secrecy was agreed upon this meeting. No one inside or outside the company was allowed to know anything about these arrangements. I was now accepted into the circle of dealmakers, we drank several glasses of whisky, smoked Cuban cigars - and I had a very uneasy feeling, which I suppressed and, as it would later turn out, grossly underestimated.

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE INNER ETHICAL CONFLICTS**

The first few orders were in the range of half a million each. I stuck to the deals and we made a profit on each one of 6 - 8%. For each offer, I flew to meet P so that he could add in his "royalties": these grew a few percent each time and soon burdened me with the task of having to explain the rising costs. At the same time, an arrangement was being made in the background between P and the new business manager who also wanted to enrich himself personally. The result of this second backhand agreement was that the final bill increased by another 15 - 20%. Of course, this put us in a precarious financial situation since our own margins were far below the sums which had been added on and it was us who had to bear the whole risk because of the fixed-price offers.

After asking our legal service how far we could go and being clearly told that a maximum of 19% kickbacks would be acceptable, I tried to find a solution with my boss. His announcement was clear: I was not allowed to talk to anyone about this agreement and I had to include a minimum of 10% profit. So I found myself in an ethical dilemma: should I submit myself to the boss and his instructions or should I run away? The latter was an absolute NO because of my sense of responsibility as a general manager and my dedication to the employees: leaving an entire company to its own fate would be comparable to a ship's captain saving himself and not caring for the passengers. In addition, my sense of justice, my sense of duty and my ambition slowed me down: I wanted to stop this morally and legally indefensible arrangement. Not unlike Don Quixote?

The first assignments went reasonably smoothly and I built up a good relationship of trust with the client's new business manager. He asked us to make an offer for a complete overhaul of two of his larger aircraft. After we had met a few times to clarify the technical issues, his concerns about P also came up one evening as we were having dinner together. He felt that he was being taken advantage of and that P was taking advantage of the situation to make a lot of money. He said that he, as the client, had the right to be informed about all costs and wanted to shape the decisions about the distribution of the kickbacks himself; his head was in the noose and he could no longer justify this increase in costs.

I listened. He was so right, but, because of my obligation to my boss, I was not allowed to tell him anything. Once again, I found myself in an ethical dilemma.

As the conversation went on, he mentioned possible orders of about 20 to 30 million USD for the next two years. Afterwards, I reported this conversation to my boss via email. Shortly thereafter, I received a call from P threatening me: I would lose everything if I continued in this way with the client. Then my manager called me: He ordered me to stick to my agreements.

So my plan was as follows: after the plane had arrived and we had worked out the quotation for the necessary work, I would try to anticipate P's demands, incorporate them into the quotation and then send it to the business manager first. In this way, I could keep to the binding agreement which we had made.

Then a nightmare began. The aircraft turned out to be in a very bad condition. Every time the technicians opened a lid, more problems appeared. The corrosion problems were so severe that the quotes from the aircraft's manufacturer were getting more expensive every week and the technical solutions were becoming more and more costly. We worked very closely with the business manager with several phone calls every day where we continuously discussed the new costs. Actually, this would not have been an insurmountable problem if it had not been for the fact that P was also involved and was making more and more audacious demands. In addition to the anticipated costs, there were also expenses such as six first-class tickets and hotel accommodation, 100'000 USD for other projects and ... and ... and.

In all my attempts to defend myself against these claims, I was always reminded by my boss to add these additional expenses to the bill after all.

The first project was halfway through when the second big project turned up in front of our hangar as the inspections on this aircraft were long overdue. Things only continued to go downhill on this project. The scope of the work on this one was about the same as on the former one. However, this aircraft was in even worse condition and meant that we had to separate the wings from the fuselage. Also, P had become extremely influential because he had now been engaged as an employee of our company and was responsible for strategic decisions with major customers.

Personally, I was now busy night after night adjusting the offers in relation to the work which we had anticipated and getting increasingly overwhelmed with demands which could not be foreseen or calculated: an expense claim here, a favour payment there. Although I increasingly resisted these demands, my boss finally ordered me to include them in the next invoice - with the simultaneous demand to include 10% for us: this was virtually impossible as we were bound to work with fixed quotes. One day, as I was desperately trying to find a way out of this dilemma with our legal service, I was warned that I already had one foot in jail as we were paying well over 30% in bribes. In the evening, I received an aggressive phone call from my boss. He asked me what I was thinking of when I was talking to outsiders about these contracts.

After the conversation, I became surprisingly angry, didn't know where to put my emotions and felt completely alone. In retrospect, this was the point at which my breakdown could no longer be averted.

## **THE BODY GOES ON STRIKE**

One morning, my CEO called me while I was on the motorway on my way to the office. During the conversation, I became so upset that my stomach began to rumble extremely. Before I could reach a service station my bowel movements had taken on a life of their own. Feeling very ashamed, I drove back home to shower and change my clothes.

I hadn't been able to sleep for a long time; at night, my thoughts had just been going around in circles. In addition, I had lost a lot of weight.

There on the motorway, it was my body which had to signal me so clearly that I had gone much too far. My ambition, my sense of justice, my sense of responsibility and duty, my dedication to the employees and my commitment could all no longer help me. My motivation and my energy for life were at an end. I had been negating central parts of my own identity and my core values over a long period of time. Due to the exhaustion which this had caused, I thought I would have to take a back step for a short while but remained convinced that, as soon as I solved the problems, I would have everything back under control. I could – and had to – hold on to that straw. Suicide was not yet an issue.

## **THE FEELING OF HOPELESSNESS**

We received a request for a quote for a large job from a client who was close linked to our main client. He recommended that we offer a fair, technically good solution. Even though he operated their fleet, his company was otherwise independent and, above all, had nothing to do with P.

We had prepared a very competitive offer which I wanted to present to the new client the next day. In the afternoon, I had intensive negotiations with my boss about not involving P because there were no contractual obligations to do so. Finally, he agreed with my approach and gave me the green light to present the offer as I had planned.

Late in the evening, I received an email from my boss with horrendous content: Contrary to our earlier agreement, P has to be included after all and therefore an additional 40% has to be added to the quotation before you can present it to the customer. Furthermore, an additional payment of USD 50,000 should go to X (a government official) to clear the aircraft for flying.

I was devastated. Impossible to present such an offer to my customer. I wrote back to my boss that this was absolutely out of the question and that we would definitely lose the customer. Completely dazed and shaking all over, I drove home late that night. The next day, I called my assistant to say that I was ill and requested not to be disturbed. I stayed at home.

All morning, I racked my brain about finding a way out and about whether I should quit and, if so, how.

Then the phone started ringing incessantly. Text messages, emails, phone calls - all asking me to call back immediately or confirm that the offer had been adjusted according to the boss's latest email.

I got violent stomach cramps and barely made it to the toilet, where I threw up violently with simultaneous diarrhoea. I started shaking uncontrollably. I felt as if I had failed across the board and completely betrayed my ethical principles, and with them, my co-workers and customers. I couldn't take it anymore - and I didn't want to.

The only last resort I could see was to put an end to my life in order to finally have some peace. Because of my insomnia, we had very strong sleeping pills at home, which I now swallowed together with all the painkillers I could find and washed them down with half a bottle of vodka. Then I wrote a farewell letter and lay down on the bed to go to sleep.

Much later that night I woke up in an intensive care unit. Since my wife who was travelling could no longer reach me by phone, she asked a friend to check on me at home. He found me in time and alerted the ambulance.

Then, in the late afternoon, they put me in another ambulance which took me to a psychiatric hospital. I could not communicate properly with anyone because my French was not good enough and no-one spoke English or German. Inside, I was absolutely empty. I felt neither anger nor hatred, nor hope, nor joy. There was a big nothingness. There was nothing to do but stare at the lake. Fortunately for me, after four days I was transferred to another psychiatric hospital where at least they spoke my native language.

## **THE TIME IN THE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL**

I have only vague memories of the first few days or weeks. I remember countless tests and clarifications from which they diagnosed a severe depression. And several antidepressants had to be tried until they found a positive reaction. Slowly I was coming out of the hole I was in - or so I thought at the time. The void was gradually filling with mostly positive thoughts. I still had my ideals: I had betrayed my co-workers and felt like a failure. But through the daily routine of the clinic, I was drawn more and more into the world of the clinic. A protected world where I discovered my talent for artistic work and handicraft. There was also sports therapy where I could let off steam and finally feel my body again.

During the sport therapy, I made friends with cocaine addicts among others. They were the most interesting, the most inspiring and we always had a lot of fun. A few of them were also present during occupational therapy and some turned out to be extremely clever and creative. In order to accommodate all the various mental illnesses, there were work assignments which turned out to be incredibly unchallenging.

Over time, everything became quite boring for me. The workshop was very well equipped for all conceivable work processes, but this potential was not utilised. After some time, the therapy director asked me to work out some new, more complex instructions. Unfortunately, these were then too complex and not reasonable for the others since I had also included work such

as cutting threads in order to produce nuts and screws. But the most disappointing experience was when I had to take a course in how to write job applications. During my last position as general manager, I had had to fill various positions and had conducted several dozen interviews with candidates which I selected from several hundred applications. So, I had acquired some expertise. What I was then taught on this course would give no-one a chance in the real business world of even being invited for an interview.

The world of work today is such that the overriding credo is profit maximisation. People like me would actually have the potential and ability to implement this. But we have the stigma of having fallen ill and been treated in a clinic. For many recruiters, or so-called human resources managers, we are a "liability". That is why an application from people like me is always discarded: I knew that from my own experience.

Thanks to the clinic, however, I was at least on the way to becoming a person again who would not vegetate in an abyss - or so I thought at the time. I even ended up in one of the best departments in the clinic where only depressive disorders were treated. Until then, I hadn't had any first-hand experience with sudden aggressive and loud outburst from patients when the hospital's security staff would have to intervene. I experienced this a few times as an onlooker and found it very disturbing each time. Brutally efficient and totally organised: not always for a reason that was obvious to me, but certainly justified. Thanks to the fact that the prescribed medication was working in my case, my own depression was under control and I felt rudimentary emotions again. Later, I underwent tests that found me to be of above-average intelligence. On other tests, I was one of the few who scored 100%. Very good for my ego, which I had reduced to minus zero during the months before my breakdown. I had something like self-esteem again.

Despite many setbacks, I gradually got better and, after five months, I was released.

### **THE RELEASE FROM THE COCOON AND THE STRUGGLE TO FIND MY WAY BACK INTO EVERYDAY LIFE**

After my discharge, I had the depression under control, largely due to the antidepressants which I now had to take every day. Also, the inner emptiness of absolute nothingness was replaced by a desire to be creatively active. My wife was still professionally involved in the part of the country where we had previously lived and which I had left in order to work for the company. So, now back at home, I spent most of my day doing something creative. The fact that we had rented out part of our house in my absence meant that I had to be considerate to the tenants. And I was pretty lonely and without structures. Waking up, soldering another fruit basket together, rearranging my basement workshop, replanting something in the garden, etc. etc. etc. That was until we had the whole house back to ourselves again and until my wife found a job nearby. But this took a long time during which boredom had crept into everyday life. My best friend became alcohol because this made everything a little more bearable.

My biggest problem was that I had no plan. Without a plan you are nobody and can't achieve anything. The clinic had discharged me as stabilised, but this important realisation of "what

happens after the clinic" was never seriously addressed. I had been cured, but without a concrete perspective for a reliable and independent future as I could only function with the support of my antidepressants.

It was this realisation which triggered a second deep crisis. The medication lost its effect and my depression took over again. It got so bad that my psychiatrist at the time had to admit me to a clinic.

### THE SECOND ADMISSION INTO A CLINIC

Honestly, I was in a hole again, so I felt glad to end up back in a psychiatric hospital. This time everything was smaller and more individualised. They continued to look for the best medications for me since the ones I was given were not of much use. In the foreground of the hospital's approach was the strengthening of one's own resources – or so it said in the clinic's brochure. Here, too, there would be work therapy offers for sports and exercise and others ranging from Reiki, to dance, to fitness programmes in nature, all of which had therapeutic effects. The physical activities helped me the most. When there is emptiness in your head, it is good to feel your body. However, they also emphasised the reactivation of one's own resources and striving for active life-planning. After the first internal consultations and discussions, we always looked for external counselling centres that could help us. For me, this triggered a number of things. After spending three months in the clinic, I wanted more, and I had a rudimentary plan for what my life could become. But, you shouldn't lose sight of reality. In the clinic, I was wrapped up in absorbent cotton again, just like the first time. When I had a bad phase, there was generally a contact person at-hand who showed some understanding. The daily programme was mostly filled with activities which one enjoys. There is a group dynamic which is hard to avoid. Everyone - the clinic staff as well as your fellow patients - wants to help you get out of your hole again and to recharge your batteries.

And then you're back home. You are on your own. Now it's a matter of implementing the goals you've set. I am lucky to have an understanding wife who supports me fully. I fear that my depression will now accompany me for the rest of my life. If I deal with it consciously and get help in time before the hole swallows me up again, I can control it.

But it is very important for me never to betray my ethical principles, my integrity and my scruples again.

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