

THE WRITING OF SILENCES

In music, it is the silences that are the most difficult to write, said composer Joseph Haydn. The same applies to management since it is easier to act than not to act. The writing of silences requires a bit of courage and much care, but the stakes are high: mobilisation of the collective intelligence and reinforcement of self-organisation among the staff.

We sometimes forget that music is composed of both sound and silence, and management of action and “non-action”. A silence in music is a presence within absence, a dynamic non-action, an “over to you” alternating with “it’s up to me to find the solution”. A silence in music is a little like abstract painting, which in revealing less liberates to an even greater extent the imagination of the person at the receiving end. It is easier to do than not to do. But when management is conducted at a punishing techno tempo, it may be questioned whether it is the best response to the growing subtlety of the world of work.

For the manager and the senior manager, the writing of silences is neither giving the staff a free rein nor doing nothing, but rather holding back from taking action – holding back when doing so wastes energy by over-specifying means rather than goals, and in so doing ignoring the input of colleagues who might provide a better solution; holding back when the alternative could be to grant some measure of autonomy, responsibility and trust which, with careful guidance, foster progress, commitment and motivation.

Although silence is intrinsically unique, there is a great diversity of silences, the nature and impact of which are determined by at least four factors: the context of a silence, its duration, how to enter a silence and how to emerge from it. First of all, there are bad silences. In music, if they are too long, the dynamics are distorted, if too short they obstruct breathing. Within the company there are silences that isolate, disesteem, distress or demoralise. Is their negative aspect properly evaluated ? And then there are the fertile silences that make us prick up our ears ...

When the director and founder of a noteworthy company who was always available to settle a problem with his employees realised that he could affect the authority of some of his managers by keeping too close an eye on everything, he decided to hold back. To ensure a successful entry into silence he clarified his own role and that of his managers, but he also defined certain decision-making processes (“Managers will settle all day-to-day problems with their teams if they come within their area of responsibility. I shall only intervene subsequently if necessary”), and certain standards (“if an employee comes to see me about something that he can settle with his manager, I shall not pursue the matter”). He also set up a weekly debriefing with his managers, emerging from his silence in a way that would make it possible to maintain control in accordance with his demands while at the same time providing freedom to act. This silence strengthened the authority of the managers and stimulated their spirit of initiative.

When the senior manager of a big company took the decision not to renew the fixed term contract of a colleague who was gifted but who did not fit in with the team, it was decided that he would be replaced by a recently recruited staff member and would be required to transfer his complex files to her. The senior manager was at the time about to absent herself for three weeks. She therefore took three measures prior to entering this unavoidable silence: an experienced colleague would take on the role of mentor to the new recruit; a meeting with the colleague who was leaving made possible a thorough review of the situation and the issues at stake; and it was agreed to maintain discretion vis-à-vis the rest of the team until her return. For her emergence from her silence she set up two debriefing sessions in advance, one with the colleague who was leaving and his replacement and the other with the mentor and a senior manager who was aware of the situation. Everything went as planned. On her return, she noted the commitment of the mentor whose action had been observed by top management, but also the respect shown by the departing colleague who had appreciated her clarity and her finesse.

While the context and the duration of a silence call on the manager's instinct and powers of analysis, entering and emerging from silence require meticulous actions. The writing of silences is difficult for a number of reasons. While in appearance it is nothingness, a silence must be located at the centre of the action of which it is both the setting and the interstice. It is often necessary to dare to use it where the tendency would be to do more. Since the goal of a silence is to mobilise the collective intelligence and improve self-organisation, the decisions management takes should not be to find solutions but to set up conditions contributing to the finding of solutions by others. On the other hand, a good silence may generate an elegant resolution, instances of serendipity, less stress and less noise.

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