

What climate are you creating?



Several years ago, I was engaged in some Executive Assessment work for the European operations of a large US manufacturing group.

One of the executives I met – let’s call him Daniel – was already leading one of their businesses across Europe and the Middle East. A sizeable enough business, just not big enough for him yet. As we met for his initial interview, with the energy and warmth of his Middle Eastern roots, he made it crystal-clear that he was determined to advance his career, one way or another.

His was not such a difficult assessment: he was the “what you see is what you get” type of person. So, when we met again a week or two later for his feedback session, I could get quite quickly to the core messages. “*I guess people would call you some kind of a bulldozer*”, I shared (after some nicer stuff). “*Sure*”, Daniel replied. “*That’s what they say.*” He visibly didn’t feel sorry about it, and there was even a dismissive look on his face. Intuitively, I decided to go one step beyond: “*Maybe ‘bulldozer’ is not strong enough. How about describing you as a ...Panzer tank?*”

I saw a sparkle in his eye. “*That’s it! A Panzer tank!*” he said, with a ferocious smile. I was a bit thrilled, too – I felt that I had managed to hit the core straight away. Calling a tank a tank, if you will. We then had a lively and engaging conversation, and I left the room confident that I had earned his respect, and hopeful that we would engage in some kind of partnership.

So what happened next? ...Nothing, actually.

Quite soon thereafter, the group launched yet another Europe-wide restructuring. Not enough growth, not enough profitability, so they took another cut at their already bone-lean regional headquarters. My contact persons got scattered all across Europe, leadership development budgets got slashed, and quite rapidly my business with them ground to a halt.

How about Daniel? We never met again. Nothing truly surprising, either – was I *really* hoping that I would coach someone like him? Panzer tanks are not really known for their appetite for such niceties. And the restructuring of his group was the perfect environment for him to thrive: Blitzkrieg-like, commando-style, with no prisoners taken.

Over the years since then, I met informally with some of his former colleagues. I asked about Daniel, and we exchanged some memories. Then one of them said: “*Did you know that, in the wall behind his office chair, he hung a huge picture of an army tank?*”

I imagine that some people sitting in front of Daniel felt that the cannon was aimed right at them.

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What brought the tank back to my mind? I was actually reflecting on a metaphor I owe to Professor Sumantra Ghoshal*. Mr Ghoshal was on his way to become one of the leading thinkers about leadership, but unfortunately passed away a few years ago, at the early age of 55 – which perhaps explains that most people have hardly heard about his work on the intrinsic challenges of working in matrixed organizations. But what I took from him was much simpler.

On some of his lectures he used a metaphor drawn from the trajectory of his life. Born and bred in Calcutta, his career brought him to teach, among others, at INSEAD. He was inspired by the atmosphere around the campus, nested in the large forest of Fontainebleau, south of Paris. As he was taking walks through these beautiful woods, he was struck by how refreshing and energizing such an environment was. When he travelled back home in the summer, the contrast was huge with the heat and humidity of Calcutta – suffocating, punishing, with every move seeming to deplete you of any energy.

He reflected on this contrast to talk about leadership. *What is the climate we are creating as leaders, across our teams and organizations? What is, as he said, “the smell of your place”?*

Some leaders, some organizations, willingly or unwillingly create a summertime Calcutta around them. Punishing, exhausting. Maybe they think they need to add pressure so as to get more engagement from their people - which only makes things worse, of course.

I’ve been wondering about the climate that Daniel, the Panzer guy, created. He had huge energy, and in his ruthless way he could stimulate others to go beyond what they thought possible. But at what cost?

And aren’t we sometimes, unwillingly and in more subtle ways, sapping some of the vitality in our teams and organizations?

“Revitalizing people”, Ghoshal said, “has a lot less to do with changing people, and a lot more to do with changing the context we’re creating.” That was, in his views, the core role of leaders.

In many organizations, autumn is the time when we bring our focus towards the next year. Maybe the time is right to think beyond targets and budgets, and ask ourselves about the climate we are creating?

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Leaving my readers with that open question gives me mixed feelings. On the one hand, it’s good to stay with a challenging question. Yet at the same time, especially writing to an unknown audience, it feels a bit too easy – giving you precious little openings to progress on these reflections.

I found some inspiration, and connected some dots, in research about *Multipliers and Diminishers* (Liz Wiseman) and about *Psychological Safety* at work (Amy Edmonson). I will share some more in upcoming memos – so stay tuned!

Olivier Schobbens, September 2021

(*) I never had the chance to attend Professor Ghoshal’s lectures, and I gladly confess that I have a rather superficial knowledge of his work. My understanding is that, for a number of reasons, he didn’t leave a lot of written research on how to think and act on what he called *the smell of the place*. In a [video](#), he does refer to replacing a culture of “Control, Constraint, Compliance and Contract” by one of “Stretch, Self-Discipline, Trust and Support”. If you have more information about this, I’d be thrilled to learn about it!