Passivity as a “magic formula” for problem solving

Stress patterns as an indicator of the failure to perceive or an attempt to fade out or suppress an existing problem or possible solutions to a problem.

Taking into account the fact that in future only those companies whose executives and employees are better and faster at acquiring new skills than their competitors will be able to survive, it is easy to see that a lack of the ability to solve problems may seriously endanger the future of an enterprise.

Article by Fritz Zehetner (SIZE Prozess Senior Consultant)

Colleagues and customers are angry with Karl M., chief of the Data Processing Department of a big organization. Once again, he has failed to complete an assignment, although at the last meeting he had made a solemn promise to do better in future. His desk looks as if it had been hit by a bomb, a colleague remarks. When asked to do someone a favour, he usually starts complaining but finally promises to do the job. If another colleague asks him another favour a little later, he will act in a similar same way: He may complain at first, but then he will make a firm promise to deal with the matter as quickly as possible.

His colleagues and his boss find it difficult to solve the problem he creates for them. For one thing, it cannot be said that Karl M. is lazy, on the contrary – he usually works longer hours than his colleagues. For another, he always gives an impression of being helpful and willing to adapt, obliging and likable – basically, they all like him as a colleague. They have already tried angry complaints as well as kind advice (such as using better time management techniques, working systematically, defining priorities, saying no every now and then...), but his reaction to all of their suggestions and pieces of advice has always been “yes, but...”. “You’re right, Mr. L., but if I do as you say, then…” And he will follow this up with arguments that sound quite reasonable and give the impression that the problem may actually be insurmountable. His colleagues are faced with a problem that leaves them angry and helpless.

Karl M. is by no means an exceptional case – he is one of those people that want to please everybody. Every time somebody asks him a favour, he drops all the other matters he is currently working on. He simply concentrates on doing what the last person he talked with told him to do. Karl M.’s dilemma is his overadaptation. He does not pay attention to his own goals and needs. To him, only other people’s goals are important. He constantly „broods“ and „fantasizes“ about what other people’s (unspoken) goals, wishes, needs and expectations might be and acts accordingly in order to anticipate those wishes. He always does what he thinks other people expect him to do without checking what their actual wishes are, and without any regard for his own needs. This attitude usually leads to programmed chaos, since it is basically impossible to always please everybody!
Overadaptation is one of four PASSIVE PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOUR, which are called passive because they do not contribute to the solution of the current problem, but on the contrary prevent its solution!

Solution-oriented behaviour:
One’s full potential of thinking, feeling and the ability to act is applied to the solution of a problem!

Passive behaviour:
The active and self-reliant solution of current problems is avoided:

Some aspects of reality are shut out. At the same time, other aspects of the problem in the Here and Now are blown up to gigantic proportions. Instead of taking action to solve the problem now, we rely on the “magic formula” that our system of reference suggests. By using this form of magic, we hope to manipulate the world in such a way that it will produce a solution – instead of becoming active, we turn passive:

PASSIVITY
Instead of applying one’s energy to the solution of a problem, it is used to block any kind of action and to do nothing!

OVERADAPTATION
One gives in to what one assumes to be what other people want. One is guided by the assumed expectations of others (without checking the correctness of this assumption) and disregards one’s own needs.

AGITATION
One’s own ability to solve the problem is discounted. An attempt is made to calm the resulting feeling of unrest by means of recurring activities, which do not contribute to the solution of the problem in any meaningful or useful way.

SELF-INCAPACITATION
(Self-restriction or violence)
There is a sudden release of energy that is directed against oneself or against other people. This kind of behaviour (psychosomatic complaints, nervous breakdown, alcohol or drug abuse, destructive behaviour…) creates a situation in which it is definitely impossible to solve the current problem. This state of affairs is supposed to cause the people around us to take the problem off our hands and solve it in our stead.
The hidden „inner purpose“ of this kind of behaviour is that people hope that *somebody else will take responsibility for their lives* if they do not face their problems themselves. **Passivity is always an attempt to shift responsibility to someone else.**

**PASSIVITY frequently occurs in situations of stress!** This stress may be caused by too much work or by having to deal with people we find difficult to get along with. By *shifting responsibility to somebody else*, people hope *to get rid of certain emotions*: e.g. being criticized for having acted in the wrong way, feelings of inadequacy etc. Above all, they hope that their passive behaviour will help them *get the kind of attention, care and recognition that every one of us urgently needs*. In this process, people often show great creativity in hiding their passivity from themselves and from others.

As long as a person (or a group or an organization) can discount a problem or certain aspects of a problem, it will be unable to solve it!

Therefore, the essence of passive behaviour is not that nothing happens, on the contrary, the situations that occur may be quite dramatic. Instead of using one’s entire spectrum of thinking, feeling and activity to solve the problem at hand, people wait for the so-called „magic formula“. This involves the hope that Time or other people will eventually solve the problem.

**What are the four distinct patterns of passive behaviour?**

**DOING NOTHING:** An employee is expected to lure back customers that have left his organization by appropriate activities. He and his team are afraid of the difficulties involved in this task. He is invited to a lecture about this particular subject. Inside, however, he is convinced that he will not be up to the task, a feeling which, however, he does not reveal to his superiors. Although he attends the lecture, he understands very little of what is said there and comes out of it in a despondent mood. In his company, it soon becomes clear that he is not actively pursuing the task he has been assigned. It is only by extended questioning that his superior eventually recognizes the employee’s dilemma, and so the superior feels called upon to take the matter into his own hands (which means that the employee’s passive behaviour has indeed produced the desired result).

**OVERADAPTATION:** Karl M. believes that other people always expect him to carry out immediately the things they tell him to do. Chaos is therefore pre-programmed for him. After having repeatedly caused anger among his colleagues and his customers by acting in this way, he feels hurt, because other people seem to take no notice of his attempts to make a serious effort. On the other hand, he has never mentioned the fact that he may be unable to carry out the desired task at once to any of the people asking him a favour. In addition, he has never suggested the definition of a sensible rule to be established inside the organization that might help to solve his dilemma. He doesn’t dare to do so because he is afraid that he might then be unable to please one of the persons concerned.

**AGITATION:** A certain organization has been constantly losing members for some time. Instead of looking for the underlying causes of this development and taking specific strategic action, the members of the organization try to calm the inner unrest created by this problem by means of *agitation*. For this purpose, they engage in constantly repeated activities which are completely useless as far as solving the current problem is concerned. In a fit of blind actionism, they hold one conference after another without making any progress at all. Most of the time, they only complain and look for people they can hold responsible for the problem.

**SELF-INCAPACITATION („Attacks“ against oneself or others):** An employee faces a difficult task that he does not feel up to. Instead of addressing the problem directly, he starts drinking heavily after work. When the aftereffects of his drinking binges become more and more noticeable on the following morning, he is called to account, which results in a nervous breakdown and leads to his being put on the sick list for several weeks.
These four types of passive behaviour are an indication of an *inner discount*, which leads to the unconscious suppression of important information which might contribute to the solution of the problem:

An example:

An organization has been losing members for some time. The organization’s head may now discount (or fade out) the **EXISTENCE** of the problem by not listening to the members’ complaints or by forgetting the whole thing immediately after they describe the problem to him. He may also say, “Well, this is true, but half a year from now things will be back to normal and then those members will return to us of their own free will”. He thereby discounts the **SIGNIFICANCE** of the problem. He would discount yet another aspect, if he recognized the problem as such and also recognized its significance for the further existence of the organization, but interpreted the current situation as inevitable and **UNCHANGEABLE**. He would thereby discount all possibilities of intervention. „There’s nothing that can be done” is the catchphrase. If, however, he does not feel up to the task of solving the problem, e.g. because he thinks it is too complicated for him, then he discounts his **PERSONAL ABILITY** to solve the problem.

**DISCOUNT:**

Discount is a term used for the failure to perceive, for fading out or suppressing an existing problem or possible solutions to this problem. As long as a person (or a system of persons) discounts a problem or certain aspects of a problem, the problem cannot be solved.

It is therefore possible to discount the problem at several levels:

The path towards a solution of the problem starts at the bottom level. Only if no discounting occurs at any of the levels can a solution be found!

If a discount takes place at one level, all the following levels are discounted as well!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXISTENCE</th>
<th>It is realized that chances for solving the problems exist, but it is felt that one may not be able to make use of these chances: „You can’t please every customer anyway!”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANCE</td>
<td>The problem is recognized, but it is not considered significant: „Yes, we’ve lost some important customers, but that’s not so bad!”</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHANGEABILITY</td>
<td>The problem is recognized, but it is considered unavoidable: „We may have lost quite a few customers, but there’s nothing we can do about it!”</td>
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<td>ABILITY</td>
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<td>Both the indicators for the problem and the problem itself are discounted, which prevents any kind of solution from being achieved: „We have no problem, everything’s going fine!”</td>
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STRESS PATTERNS AS INDICATORS FOR DISCOUNTS:

- The charming egoist
  - STRESS PATTERNS AKTIVE Personality Style
  - Manipulative overstepper of limits

- The Compulsive Perfectionist
  - STRESS PATTERNS ANALYTICAL Personality Style
  - Control freak obsessed with detail

- The Strained and Confused type
  - STRESS PATTERNS CREATIVE Personality Style
  - Rebellious critic

- The Withdrawn Daydreamer
  - STRESS PATTERNS QUIET Personality Style
  - Rigid hermit

- The Self-sacrificing, Over-adjusted Type
  - STRESS PATTERNS SENSITIVE Personality Style
  - Discouraged and complaining

- The Suspicious Skeptic
  - STRESS PATTERNS VALUES-ORIENTED Personality Style
  - Rigid Preserver
The path towards the ability to act and take responsibility

It is not an "over-responsible" know-it-all attitude but a cautious confrontation of persons or entire teams that may create the preconditions for three necessary steps:

1. SUPPORTING A CLEAR PERCEPTION OF THE REAL SITUATION
   ("Where do we discount ourselves, other people or the situation itself?"
   "How do we explain the fact that our behaviour has not produced a solution so far?")

| Existence of the problem (PERCEPTION) | - What is the real problem?  
|                                        | - What kind of structure (people involved, the facts of the case)
|                                        |   has it got?  
|                                        | - How has it come about?  |

| Significance of the problem (CLARIFICATION) | - What’s the significance of the problem for him/her/myself/us?  
|                                           | - Who is interested in finding or in preventing a solution?  
|                                           | - What are the consequences, and for whom?  |

| Changeability of the problem (SEEING ALTERNATIVES) | - What general possibilities for a solution are there?  
|                                                    | - Above all: What resources are there for the solution of the problem?  |

| Personal ability to solve the problem (MAKING USE OF ONE’S OWN POWER) | - Approaching the solution as a whole or by a step-by-step process  |

2. EMPOWERMENT AND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR MORE INITIATIVE AND ACTIVITY

3. MUTUAL RECOGNITION FOR ACTIVE, RESPONSIBLE PROCEDURES

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