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'GIVE ME SOME IDEAS TO CHANGE THIS FINANCIAL GROUP INTO A REAL TEAM !'

by

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Kingfisher Group

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Report by Pascal Lefebvre
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Overview

The CEO of the Kingfisher Group is an unflappable British financier. The company is the third largest in the world in its field, and has over one thousand stores worldwide. It employs eighty thousand people who, like its customers, have a wide range of cultures and languages. As a result, it is hard to identify a common culture or 'One Team', and to ignore specific characteristics. However, this CEO is also a man who is convinced that the social responsibility of a company is not empty words but by creating ties between employees, one can help to improve both individual lives and group performances. When the CEO met Benedikt Benenati, they instantly hit it off. They have now been working together for four years, and are united in their unwavering confidence and common objectives. Their collaboration has not been without its problems, but has progressed with the talent and foresight characteristic of this tireless opponent of stereotypical managerial practices.

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TALK : Benedikt Benenati

The work that I have been doing for the last twenty years can best be summed up by Nokia's motto, 'Connecting people'. In all the companies in which I have worked, I have tried to create links and to connect people working in the organisation in a sensible way so that they can implement the necessary strategies. Throughout my career, the job titles that I have been given have not always suited me. They have ranged from 'director for change', 'development director', to 'head of organisation', or I was in charge of leadership, or internal communication, and so on. With each new job, I was happy to accept the job title in a somewhat detached way, telling myself each time that this was my opportunity not to be pigeonholed.

In his talk at the École de Paris¹, Norbert Alter pointed out that people who paradoxically are both committed to something and yet not fully involved have a certain advantage. Even though I am Italian and studied political science, I have worked in England and India with engineers, in start-ups and large multinationals. I have always been different from everyone else, and yet I always wanted to bring people together. Eight years after I had started working for Danone, I was contacted by a head hunter via LinkedIn who wanted me to meet Ian Cheshire, the CEO at Kingfisher. At that time, this group was just a financial holding company which managed companies such as Castorama and Brico Dépôt in France, and B&Q in the United Kingdom. It was the third largest home improvement retailer in the world, and had more than one thousand stores and eight thousand employees worldwide.

I met Ian Cheshire in London. He received me informally, not wearing a tie, at the company's headquarters in a two-storey, unpretentious building. Instead of conducting a recruitment interview, we had a real conversation. When he said in his cultured British accent that he was offering me a 'blank piece of paper', I realised that what he meant was that he wanted Kingfisher to become a group in which the employees worked together in a way which was different from the traditional Anglo-Saxon model. I was obviously very pleased with this idea because it reminded me of the Danone ethos (even though it differed slightly). I immediately accepted the job, and four years ago I moved my family to London where I started working for Kingfisher.

The story of Rose and Pedro

I was given a 'blank piece of paper' with no particular role. I saw this as a real opportunity, but at the same time it was a little stressful because, from the outset, all I had was the task, clearly expressed by Ian Cheshire, to bring together all the existing cultures in his company without making all the employees identical.

I introduced the story of Rose and Pedro which I had already used before, but which is a simple way to explain my role. Rose is in charge of a specific department in a store (a Castorama or B&Q). She has a team and of course she has many problems to solve. She can manage these problems in a number of ways : she can hide them under the carpet ; or she can ask her team to manage the problems for her ; or, if this is not possible, she can ask her boss for help, who, in turn, can ask his or her superior.

Somewhere else, in another part of the organisation, Rose's colleague Pedro is faced with the same practical problem which, in a company of eighty thousand employees, is not statistically surprising. Pedro acts like Rose, because in organisations today this is what generally happens. Pedro's actions set in motion a vertical hierarchy (asking his team or asking his boss) which, in terms of productivity, is costly and completely ridiculous. However, if Rose and Pedro were to talk to each other directly, which is a very simple but radical idea, their

¹ Norbert Alter, Itinéraires des patrons atypiques : la force de 'l'étranger', *'Économie et sens' seminar, École de Paris du management* (ref ES061113).

problem could be solved quickly and at minimal cost. How in an organisation can one connect all these people, regardless of rigid hierarchical flows which were probably inspired by Bismarck, but which still exist today ? The answer is obvious : one should encourage these sorts of connections at all levels and, especially, one should connect the Roses and Pedros of this world. Some people call this 'transversality', cross collaboration, or even organisational innovation.

Kingfisher's 'One Team' concept is not like the idea applied in some companies whose aim is to standardise all the processes that take place there. As far as we are concerned, it is an alternative way which implies a degree of communication allowing one to work with other people, but continuing to remain the same. It is extremely ambitious, perhaps a little naïve, but it is what Ian Cheshire wanted me to do. How can one promote a favourable environment in which Rose and Pedro can work together ? In my experience over the last twenty years, I have acquired a few convictions which guide me, and on which I have relied to rise to the challenge.

The first conviction is that people are frightened. This is one of the most important unmentionable features in organisations. When I say that 'corporate diseases' are increasingly common in companies, and that of these 'diseases', fear is undoubtedly the most insidious, this is because it is almost institutionalised. One hears about management methods using fear as a tool, and there are frequent examples of managers using the 'carrot and stick' method. Fear is not an enemy unless it paralyses us and forces us to act against our better judgement as explained in Christian Morel's book 'Les décisions absurdes' ('Absurd decisions'). This sort of fear is a cancer for organisations. 'Corporate autism' can also exist in companies. This is when everyone becomes enclosed in his or her bubble and nobody speaks to anybody else.

The third conviction is what I call the 'corporate crick-in-the-neck'. When one has a problem, one cannot turn one's head to the left or the right to find the Pedros of this world, because we are either used to looking upwards to get our boss' approval, or downwards to check on our colleagues. There is a real need for 'physiotherapy' in such cases to make sure that Rose and Pedro can feel at ease in their environments, and involve themselves much more in their work rather than thinking that the job they are doing is their only means of survival.

All these diseases are clearly linked to fear. When we are frightened, we do not trust other people nor ourselves. We put in place monitoring and other processes to make sure that everything is well controlled. We spend more time justifying ourselves by using reporting procedures than working or innovating. Processes which were devised to optimise our work become suffocating, are sometimes absurd, and an insult to productivity. I remember a phrase which Pierre Deheunynck, my boss at Danone, used to say : 'I have nothing against processes unless they become an end in themselves'. How, then, should we dismantle these processes, without at the same time starting the organisation from scratch, when there are eighty thousand employees and each country, culture and team generates its own bureaucracy ?

One of the first mistakes I made in England fifteen years ago when collaborative management was in fashion was to create an Intranet site. I obviously put my heart and soul into it and I thought that everyone would see that it was the solution. Quite clearly, this was not the case. People are frightened and do not like changing their habits or going outside their comfort zone : at best they pretend to go along with the change which has been imposed on them. Therefore, many managers give the impression, when they talk, that their behaviour is exemplary whereas in practice, the opposite is the case. Just as in love, actions speak louder than words.

This realisation, which was essential, helped me to avoid making the same mistakes twice, in particular in my current job which was to convince thirty thousand English employees and twenty-three thousand French employees to work together. I know both cultures, but I think that my Italian passport gave me an advantage by conferring on me some sort of diplomatic immunity, even though sometimes I have the impression that my role is more like that of a United Nations peacekeeper. It is not enough to announce an *entente cordiale* ; it has to be demonstrated with actions.

Three positions

To deal with these difficulties, I have chosen to adopt three positions.

The first position is the 'poacher', in other words, I am always on the look-out for other people's good ideas. Some people call this serendipity. When I see a photograph of Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, taken in 1956 by the photographer Philippe Halsman who asked them (as one did of all famous people at that time) to jump in the air in order to feel less inhibited, I say to myself that at the next event I organise I will take a trampoline and ask all the managers to have their photographs taken in this way. In this field, there is nothing new : it is just well disguised plagiarism. In certain companies there is a new state of mind called 'open source'. This means that people should express their ideas openly and adapt any ideas that they feel will correspond to their needs. Because I am naturally curious, when I visit our subsidiaries I am keen to discover what is working well there, and what could be replicated elsewhere.

The second position, which I had already tested at Danone, is the 'squatter'. I am not there to create new situations, but to get myself involved in situations which already exist, destabilise them and, in concrete terms, to play jokes.

My third position is the 'joker' which is linked to the fear I mentioned earlier. Fun, by which I include everything which destabilises a situation, is more or less an antidote to fear. Sometimes we need to be distracted or put off guard a little in order to overcome our fear.

Thanks to the 'blank piece of paper' which Ian Cheshire gave me, I have been able to implement what I call 'positive destabilisations', a series of 'indecent proposals' intended to produce unexpected situations in real-life settings where people experience things which ordinarily they do not want to experience. This makes them realise that once they have got over their initial surprise, these experiences were useful to them and also to their colleagues. Poacher, squatter and joker : these are my three new ways of working.

Real conversations and the market place

When I started my job, I spent three months from April to June 2010 visiting all the subsidiaries. I quickly realised that prevarication was alive and well at Kingfisher, as it is in all large organisations. I had established relationships, people had confided in me and trusted me, but what is said to me by people around the coffee machine is not the same as they would say in a meeting room or on stage at a convention. This is what people do but it wastes a great deal of time. Therefore, I wanted these informal conversations to take place also at conventions.

All conventions, whether at Kingfisher or elsewhere, are generally organised according to the lay-out of the conference hall to reflect the hierarchy. In other words, the managers are on the stage and the employees are seated in lines in front of them listening obediently. Frequently, after fifteen minutes, people start looking discreetly at their Smartphones.

The very first convention I organised at Kingfisher took place in Barcelona, and brought together the top two hundred and fifty managers of the Group. As I had carte blanche, I reserved a room of 1,000 square metres in a hotel in the city, and I rearranged the room so that instead of a stage, there were small alcoves, each able to seat five people. By arranging this room in a rather unusual way, I wanted it to represent the coffee machine situation where people could have real, honest conversations. Thus I called my first indecent proposal the 'real conversations'.

All the participants were given a badge with their seat number so that they could not sit where they wanted. When they arrived, the participants came through a tunnel and discovered the

room with both great surprise and dismay. Because I also thought that the sound and lighting were important features, I installed four giant screens in the centre of the room. However, because of the intimate alcoves, people had the impression that they were in a boudoir.

Before this convention, I had sent the managers a questionnaire asking them for subjects which they thought needed to be discussed. Three topics clearly emerged : Kingfisher's organisation ; how we develop our products ; and the way in which we manage our customer relations. These subjects were areas of disagreement and the participants were invited to discuss them. The lighting effects set the tone for the proceedings. Initially, one person addressed the entire audience and took a few minutes to introduce the subject with simultaneous translation in French and English. Then the lighting changed and the atmosphere became more intimate, and the discussions began in each of the alcoves. After this, the main lights were then put back on, and microphones were passed to the spokesperson of each small alcove group. The president was naturally present throughout the entire 'anti-waffle' exercise, which many of the participants hated because they were not used to being in the spotlight, in front of an audience and cameras, expressing their points of view. The message clearly was 'You are the driver, not the passenger'. It was obviously unsettling, but it was also the beginning of a new way of working together.

In June, it is hot in Barcelona. After sitting in an air-conditioned room, we invited the participants to go outside onto the terrace where we had installed the 'market place', my second indecent proposal. A market place involves people in the distribution industry. The idea was that instead of watching a PowerPoint presentation of thirty slides one after another on a screen without interruption, we were to have twenty-five market stalls, each supervised by a field manager dressed according to the nature of his or her stall. Each participant was given a book, 'The shopping kit', which listed the good practices and the useful contacts, and five cheques which allowed the participant to buy solutions that he or she considered necessary, for free. The idea was that if Rose had a problem, there would be twenty-five Pedros to help her in the setting of an open-air market and not in an air-conditioned, obscure conference room.

Of course, if the joker is to have any sort of legitimacy, then the big corporate boss must also play the game and get dressed up like the others in order not to appear different from anyone else. Costumes play an important role in this. So, in this market place setting, Ian Cheshire put on a straw hat and a vegetable seller's apron on which was written 'My job is to connect you'. All the other regional bosses did the same, and all the 'big bosses' were invited to play the game so that everyone was connected. When I was working at Danone, I had managed to make a very serious executive director and a regional manager, whom everyone feared, wear captain uniforms and pink socks from 'The Love Boat' television series, and they both played along. They were still the captains in charge and they had the stripes on their caps to prove it, but with their pink socks the aim was to project the hierarchy in a more agreeable light, in other words, by really putting them on an approachable level with the employees. This market place scenario was an immediate success at Kingfisher because of its innate appeal : when a person has a problem, he recognises that someone else has a solution and he spontaneously chooses to talk to this person. This is what the British and Americans call 'empowerment'.

The 'So what ?!' sessions

As a result of remarks made about the first convention, the last three hours of every subsequent meeting consist of what we called the 'So what ?!' sessions, our third indecent proposal. Each 'tribe' has one hour to meet and talk about what they liked and disliked, and then present their future actions. People simply cannot leave on the sly at the end of the convention without having made some decisions about the actions they will take when they return to their stores.

The 'Royal Wedding'

In our business in England we have a very serious problem known as 'corporate autism' : the four hundred people who make up our store and sales teams and who create our catalogue do not talk to each other. The commercial director of B&Q, a Frenchwoman, did not understand why the relationship with her counterpart, the operations director who was Welsh, was difficult (this is a very common situation in the distribution business). When I asked her what exactly she expected of him, she highlighted three things. When I asked her whether she was willing to make any concessions with him and openly discuss these three things if he was equally willing, she replied that she would be ready to commit to their professional relationship and essentially make vows, like in a marriage. I saw this context as an opportunity to put their relationship back on the right path in a very public way, and decided to make it my fourth indecent proposal, the 'Royal Wedding'.

At the next convention, rather than follow the usual format, I decided to put this proposal in place. The bride, the French commercial B&Q director, put on a wedding dress ; the groom, the operations director, put on a Welsh kilt ; and the 'wedding' was celebrated by the finance director who gave his blessing. The couple agreed to make three vows to help them co-operate. This all took place in front of the 'wedding guests', the teams who were present at the convention. Rather than watch two two-hour PowerPoint presentations, one for her and one for him, the bride and groom each spoke for half an hour, and then for the next three hours, the floor was open to questions and discussion. This shows the positive destabilisation which I hold dear, in other words, how to implement a different experience in order to put in place new ways of working.

The elephant in the room

The fifth indecent proposal is a series of sessions entitled 'the elephant in the room'. This elephant concept is very English. The elephant is there, in the room, everybody sees it, but no-one mentions it. Why not play on this and make it into theatre ? People could then talk freely and discuss problems which everyone knows about but nobody wants to talk about.

At a seminar in Istanbul, Ian Cheshire agreed to the idea of a meeting where the topic was the characteristics of a leader. They included someone who was modest and who was not always right ; someone who was able to confront his 'dark zones' ; someone who perseveres and who faces up to his or her problems, and so on. The participants, who undoubtedly had expected a new 'market place' scenario, had to listen to a twenty-minute talk by Ian Cheshire on leadership and the concept of the elephant in the room. 'So let's get started !' he concluded.

No sooner had he said this than the lights went out, the room was thrown into darkness, a curtain fell and a huge inflatable elephant, which was both impressive and slightly disturbing, appeared in the corner of the room. This 'event' marked the initiation of 'real conversations' between the participants which subsequently took place over the next two days in various settings including on boats on the Bosphorus and in cafés in the city, before everyone came back to the group setting to share their personal elephants. Clearly no-one, not even Ian Cheshire who had taken the risk, had been warned about the nature of this meeting. It was a new method of working. Now we talk about our elephants.

The lessons learned from Dubai

Obviously, these are dangerous games even though they are highly commendable. It might be destabilising to put such subjects on the table, and therefore one must be sure not to lose control. Usually participants like to know what is going to take place at such meetings in order to form an opinion in advance and keep control : now there is no longer an agenda, just an intention. We implement a process, but we have no control over the content. It is the participants who produce the content. If they do not play the game, it is a failure, but we take the risk and I think it is very inspiring that a CEO agrees to take this on.

My most spectacular failure took place in Dubai a few months later at a large meeting for our sales force organised by one of our most important local suppliers. This type of meeting is usually a moment when people jostle for territory, and so it was the opportunity to clear the air with a few jokes. Unfortunately, this was not possible and the atmosphere remained tense. The following day I had organised a terrific excursion in jeeps into the desert, but no-one wanted to have fun. Jokes can also be painful : they can sometimes be moments of lucidity, unease, and distress but these difficult moments must be part of a group experience.

Taking one step back before jumping

On the other hand, one of the best events I ever organised took place two years ago two weeks before an important meeting of three hundred people in Marseilles at the Docks des Suds. This is a rather austere place, but which has the advantage of being very large and not very expensive, which is an important factor during an economic crisis. One morning during one of our frequent trips on the Eurostar, I had the sudden feeling that I should cancel everything and I told Ian Cheshire about it. ‘Yeeeessss...’, he replied with his customary British phlegm, ‘for what reason ?’ ‘I think that because we do not see eye-to-eye on a certain number of points the meeting would not be suitable for this kind of audience.’

We discussed this and agreed that the ‘real conversations’ should indeed take place, but in small groups, and that it was better to postpone the large group meeting, otherwise we would be heading for disaster. In this case, the best solution was to do nothing, which is sometimes the best thing to do. Consequently, only about twenty participants were invited to this huge place. This was symbolically very important because we should have had three hundred people, but we had to sort out certain problems in advance. These twenty people who needed to talk and not ‘put on a show’ in front of three hundred colleagues were then able to have frank discussions.

The ‘One Team’ brigade

Everything which I have mentioned involves the executives because it is the executives who have the greatest difficulty in allowing their teams more autonomy. However, in the workplace other things can also happen. Two years ago, we opened a lovely store in Marseilles using an innovative concept. An idea came to me when I visited the store : why not invite one or two heads of department from each of the subsidiaries to come and help ? This was the beginning of the ‘One Team’ brigade which brought together employees from Russia, Poland and China (to mention just a few) who came to Marseilles for ten days to help with the inauguration of this new store. Their common language was, of course, English, but I remember two Polish employees who managed to sell garden furniture in Marseilles without knowing a single word of French ! Since then, other ‘One Team’ brigades have been created, in order to perpetuate themselves and to continue to bring together all the employees and not just the managers.

The Conference of the birds

‘The Conference of the birds’ is a twelfth century Sufi, Persian poem written by Attar which describes the saga of birds who are desperately looking for their leader. Like Ulysses, they have a large number of adventures when crossing seven valleys including the Valley of Death, the Valley of Love, and the Valley of Oblivion. During this journey, many of them die and finally, when they arrive at the shores of a lake in which they can see their reflections, they discover that the leader whom they dearly wanted to find is none other than themselves. This story appealed to me and I started thinking that eight months after cancelling Marseilles, in addition to a product presentation, the participants should have a rather special experience.

Ian Cheshire presented the proposed experience to three hundred executives who had not been warned about it. He first stood inside a circle he had drawn on the ground and said ‘If you stay in this circle, you will learn nothing.’ Then he stepped outside the circle and said ‘To build something together, we have to dare to step outside our comfort zone, and this is when

life starts getting interesting. So now you are going to be here for a show which lasts three hours, but you are going to create the show.' The reactions, both of surprise and anxiety, were exactly what I had expected. I heard people saying 'Wow ! This is going to be exciting, but I will really be leaving my comfort zone'. This was one of the more moderate remarks...

The way other people see us is sometimes discomfoting, but being in a group is reassuring. Those who were initially reticent and reserved gradually joined the group which is when things started to become enjoyable. Everyone worked hard, united in a common objective. They were helped by professional actors who taught the groups their methods and technical skills. The creative and innovative ability of some participants was surprising.

Ian Cheshire, who also took part in the final scene, drew the following conclusions : 'The practical example of finding one's way forward through an unusual situation creates in us a kind of memory asking ourselves 'what did we feel ?' or 'what was my body memory during that experience ?' Being able to learn lessons from this is very useful because we are all going to come across situations in which we will probably be outside our comfort zone, and we will overcome them if we approach them in the right way. In this sense, 'The Conference of the birds' is a parable about leadership.'

Personally, not only had I been out of my comfort zone for a year when I decided to host this 'Conference of the birds', but I was scared to death ! I started doubting it on numerous occasions and this required both Ian Cheshire and myself to find huge amounts of self-confidence. In the worst case scenario, I told myself I could have been fired, but I would have been happy to have experienced this. In the end it turned out to be a moment that brought us together. Now everyone knows that in the future they will be capable of doing something which may appear to be incongruous, but which will result in concrete achievements, because they have already experienced it successfully.

The 'Live Sessions' and the 'One Team Product Show'

In the Danone factories I had already tested the idea that a company should carry out a teaching role and help its employees to understand its economic issues and performances. The aim of this is for the employees to become increasingly interested in their own work. When I arrived at Kingfisher, I still had this idea in my head, but the regional bosses were a little wary.

These 'Live Sessions' were my tenth indecent proposal. In most of the subsidiaries, they have become monthly meetings lasting forty-five minutes, during which a co-worker, director, departmental manager or an employee give an overview of the state of the business and the store, and the rest of the time is devoted to questions and answers. These teaching sessions are very lively and in the end decisions are taken which demonstrate shared responsibility. A long period of time was necessary to train and to work with the store directors who had to understand that their job was not only to give orders, but also to provide some meaning.

Last year, I discovered that the Turkish B&Q UK sales manager and all the store managers and departmental managers wanted to organise a salon in which the new range of products for the coming season would be presented to them by their suppliers. The French Castorama managers wanted to do the same thing a week later. I suggested they did it together. People immediately gave me reasons against this, citing travelling costs and other factors. I am a stubborn person and I can also be persuasive, which is why last October six thousand people from our stores all over the world converged on the Zénith Arena in Lille to meet five hundred suppliers who were presenting thousands of products at the first 'One Team Product Show'. As well as the sales teams, all the store directors had come with their departmental managers, and this enormous event generated a huge amount of interest. Everyone, regardless of nationality, could discover everyone else's products and compare them to his own, make contacts at the evening events, discover a market place, and so on.

The 'Kissbook'

My last and latest indecent proposal is the 'Kissbook'. This is an app for Smartphones which someone devised for us. The idea is that employees should continue to communicate with each other without any constraints, as everyone can have the app installed on their own telephone. Why is it called 'Kiss'? This brings us back to the leadership idea: a generous leader likes to help and likes being thanked. This app allows you to send a thank-you kiss to someone who has given you an idea, and allows you to explain why you sent a kiss. The other sort of leader, the curious leader, likes discovering new things, and when this is the case he sends a kiss. It is a tool aimed at accelerating mutually generous behaviour.

An important discovery for me was that at the 'One Team Product Show', instead of distinguishing real life from virtual life, when the store managers saw a product they liked, they used this app to present it to their colleagues. There are now twelve thousand regular 'Kissbook' users who use it at the right time and for the right reasons.

First lessons learned

The main lesson I learned from this experience was the need for patience. It takes a long time to create a good internal communication network. Therefore one needs a great deal of kindness, hindsight and trust. One must also know how to let go, and how to be an intelligent judge of certain situations.

At the meetings I have organised, it is quite easy to get people enthusiastic, but what really counts is what takes place between the events. Upsetting people is not an aim in itself, but the event has to be productive and make sense on a daily basis in the life of the company and not just create a buzz. These events which remain in our memory are sources of motivation. A market place, for example, will only be successful if it encourages participants who return home after the convention to let their teams have the same experience. This is what occupies half my time: I am in charge of a network of communication directors in subsidiaries to whom I explain that their job is not to be the mouthpiece of the CEO, but to take action and create links between the employees.

With regard to this, I ought to acknowledge the important work which these internal communication directors have provided by involving the directors of their stores in the implementation process of this 'local' communication approach. I am just a catalyst. The people responsible for the success of this approach are these 'discrete heroes', a network of loyal servants in the service of their king (or queen) who, in their subsidiary, also develop indecent proposals and as a result of their own courage and perseverance ensure that this cultural transformation lasts.

DISCUSSION

On the edge of the precipice ?

Question : *To achieve the success which you have had, apart from your personality, certain circumstances need to come together including a rich and healthy company, employees who are secure in their jobs, an exceptional CEO, and so on. Without these factors, these 'off limits' practices can prove to be risky. Like Charlie Chaplin in 'Modern Times', you always seem to be skating close to the edge without ever falling in.*

Benedikt Benenati : Some bosses project anxiety. Ian Cheshire embodies calm in the noblest sense of the word. He has confidence in what he has chosen, and he also has real convictions with regard to social responsibility which earned him a knighthood from the Queen. These qualities enable him to take risks such as the 'elephant in the room', and make skating so close to the edge possible. I always work in a professional manner to get the results which are in accordance with the mission I have been given, but I could not work if I had to obey orders. He trusts me because he trusts himself. As the court jester which I am, working for a king like Ian Cheshire is a privilege.

In terms of financial resources, everything is always done economically. The elephant cost four hundred Euros and fits into a suitcase ; the rooms I choose are rooms which no other company would choose for such events ; and to make a market place, all you need are four feathers and three hats for costumes. I am not excessive or flamboyant in what I do, and I am particularly careful not to step outside the boundaries of decency to carry out my proposals, which alone are indecent.

Personally, if I am constantly on the edge of the precipice, it is because I am very aware of the fragility of roles in companies, notably my own role, and the roles of all those who take risks. All these tests have to be managed extremely precisely, and one must never lose sight of the professional objective. Afterwards they seem interesting, but sometimes the reaction of the participants can be so cold, especially in Anglo-Saxon settings, that you feel that your fate is sealed in the first fifteen minutes.

Q. : *Are you accused of manipulation ?*

B. B. : The English distinguish between 'mischief', which implies an ability to convince someone, and 'manipulation', which is associated with malice. The difference between the two is one's ultimate intention and is therefore an ethical choice. In the end, do we want to improve on what exists already, or do we do it to satisfy a personal interest which we would rather not own up to ? Kingfisher's mission is 'Better homes, better lives'. This clearly states its end goal and the service it gives its customers. As far as I am concerned, in these circumstances, I assume the term 'mischievous', but with positive intent.

Not short of breath

Q. : *How can one maintain such an approach when one knows that such approaches rarely stand up to changes in the managers who initiated them and any newcomers ? And how does one manage to convey to the employees what the executives have experienced ?*

B. B. : As far as the new arrivals in the group are concerned, everything depends on leading by example. Our corporate values may be well known, but if they are not supported by the decisions and the choices that we make, they serve no purpose. I concentrated on the Top 200 managers, but I also got the employees who are five or six hierarchical levels below the managers involved in events, such as the one in Marseilles, so that they can experience it at first-hand, and when they go back to their stores, they strengthen the commitments made by their superiors. Working at the top and the bottom of the hierarchy means that the experience of market places can be passed on to the subsidiaries.

Q. : *Since these things can go on and on, when will your job be completed ?*

B. B. : In my case such a change in culture cannot take place in less than five or even ten years. In fact, it never stops, and my job is to poach new ideas and adapt them in order to keep them alive. Since the 'Conference of the birds' in Barcelona, some people have left the company for various reasons, others are still there, some have joined the company, and we have bought a company in Romania. This is the regular life of a dynamic company. Kingfisher is a group which is making its own way. It is complex but, personally, I love that !

Q. : *Have these destabilising events made some participants question their place in the company ? Some of your events do not turn out the way you want them to : how do you handle this ?*

B. B. : The general technique is positive destabilisation. One leaves one's comfort zone, but the aim is certainly not to make people feel uneasy, or ridiculous or to feel different. We always want to be benevolent, and someone who cannot really keep to the rules of the game can always leave. I make up the groups in advance and things have only gone wrong once. Alternatively, those who run the highest risk of being greatly upset are the little Hitlers who find it impossible to stop giving orders and who use fear as a management tool. Having For them their practices questioned is in any case inevitable, regardless of the means used.

Q. : *You handle group dynamics enthusiastically. Where does this come from ?*

B. B. : My mother is Austrian and was born in Belgrade. She lived in Egypt for twenty years and was steeped in French culture despite the fact that my father is Sicilian. I now work in England having previously worked in India for the United Nations with a network of information centres. I have also worked for the European Union, in a multinational communications company, and for Danone in France. I am a living example of a diverse culture in which making links is normal and this taught me to pay attention to 'weak signs' and other people. The problem is the same, whether one is in a family, an organisation or a government ministry, but the approach depends on the individual with the ultimate aim of being content.

Presentation of the speaker :

Benedikt Benenati : internal communication director at Kingfisher Plc. His aim is to create a collaborative culture and he is in charge of the Group's transformation project. Having studied political science, he started working in 1993 for industrial companies (Marconi and Danone), start-ups and international bodies in the field of organisational development and leadership as well as communication.

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