1

Solving the Unsolvable

How can I motivate employees who are always complaining? How can I make sure that managers from other departments commit to the decisions taken in the management team? How can I keep my highly skilled employees once they are good enough to start their own business? How can I make unpopular decisions and retain the trust and good working relationship with subordinates? How can I prevent human vices such as greed and hubris from leading to flawed strategic decisions?

All managers encounter problems which have a negative impact on organizational performance—bottom line or working climate—and which defy all the managers' attempts at solving them. Such problems are often human, rather than technical. This is sometimes humorously expressed in the phrase: Management would be easy if it weren't for people. Sometimes you may find yourself in a situation where everybody in the organization seems to agree on doing something but for some inexplicable reason, it just never gets done. For example, if you are a manager in a cleaning service organization, you may want employees to systematically carry out cleaning controls as a way to secure quality. Everybody in the organization may agree that this is important. Yet, it always gets left out or down prioritized, and nobody knows why. There just never seems

to be time to carry out the controls. At other times, you may find yourself in a situation where you feel you understand all stakeholders' interests and it is clear to you that there are conflicts inherent in the system of stakeholders which simply cannot be solved. For example, nurses have chosen their vocation because they want to help people to the best of their ability, and through their education they acquire knowledge about what today's medical technology can do for each patient. However, when they start working, they discover that due to limited resources they will often have to do what is second (or third) best for their patients. This can be profoundly discouraging to them and make them feel that they are doing a bad job as a nurse. As their manager, you may understand the problem as the inevitable result of the clash between professional and economical interests, which can never be fully solved. Yet at other times the problems are internal to the manager. For example, you may be a manager of a one-man organization. On the one hand, you know that you need to take time to follow up on potential customers and to collect and label invoices for your accountant. On the other hand, every time you engage with such administrative tasks, you feel restricted and bored as if all life has been drained out of you. Or maybe you are the manager of a team of employees, and sometimes you get angry with them, but you feel this is an inappropriate feeling for a manager to have toward employees. You cannot help it—only hide it.

This book is about those seemingly unsolvable problems managers face every day. It is about the problems which persist year after year; the problems which persist even after you have tried all the tips and tricks provided by teachers, colleagues, friends, and books; and the problems which are immune to the MBA toolbox.

This book presents a new approach to dealing with such problems. This approach is based on recent research and theoretical developments in cognitive science (Barsalou 2010; Lakoff 2012; Wilson 2002; Johnson and Rohrer 2007; Johnson 2007), which shows that cognition is metaphorical and embodied in nature, that is, we represent more abstract phenomena, such as social interactions, power, motivation, commitment, success, negotiation, communication, and value, as analogous to more concrete sensorimotor experiences. In other words, we use the structure in concrete sensorimotor experiences to give structure to more

abstract phenomena. I call the sensorimotor experiences used in this way "sensory templates".

For example, you may be faced with the problem of having a demotivated team of employees, who keep being demotivated no matter what you do. Every time you address one reason for their demotivation, another one emerges. You may feel the situation is like a tug-of-war where the employees pull in the direction of discontentment and you in the direction of contentment. Or you may feel that the situation is like Sisyphus work where raising the contentment is like pushing a large boulder up the mountain and every time you leave the employees the boulder tumbles back down into the valley of discontentment. Or you may feel that dealing with the employees is like riding your bicycle toward contentment with the breaks of discontentment on. Thus, you may use different sensorimotor experiences, such as engaging in a tug-of-war, pushing a boulder up a hill, or riding your bicycle with the breaks on, as tools to understand what kind of situation you are dealing with.

Depending on which sensory template managers use to represent a problematic situation, they will be able to imagine very different ways in which they can act in this situation. Using the tug-of-war template, a manager may try to pull harder. Using the Sisyphus template, a manager may try to find ways of making the boulder stay at the top of the mountain. Using the bicycle template, a manager may try to identify and remove the cause of the friction.

It may seem that it shouldn't matter which of these sensory templates you use. However, in this book I argue that it matters a great deal. In fact, seeing the problematic situation as analogous to one particular sensorimotor experience may result in the problem appearing unsolvable, whereas seeing the problematic situation as analogous to a different sensorimotor experience can result in the problem becoming an easy thing to deal with. The reason the use of a particular sensory template can make a situation appear unsolvable is that none of the possible ways of acting afforded by this sensory template work. In the example with the discontent employees, it is possible that no forms of pulling, such as monetary rewards, acknowledgment, threats of sanctions, and highlighting successes, will ever make them content. In such situations, a solution can be found by changing the sensory template you use to imagine possible actions in

the situation to one that *does* afford efficient ways of acting. In the example with the discontent employees, it is possible that no forms of pulling will work, but detecting and removing forms of friction may.

The starting point of this book is Chris Argyris and Donald Schön's work on managers' theories of action (Argyris 1976; Argyris and Schön 1974; Schön 1986). In short, Argyris and Schön claim that managers' actions are guided by unconscious assumptions about markets, the organization, what motivates employees, and so on. They call these assumptions theories-in-use. What theories-in-use managers operate from can be deduced from their concrete actions and may be very different from the theories the managers consciously believe they are following, their espoused theories of action. Sometimes managers' theories-in-use are detrimental to their efficiency as managers and consequently to organizational performance. Thus, it is important to change such theories-in-use to increase managers' efficiency. However, this can be very difficult to do (Argyris 1990). In Chap. 2, I present Argyris and Schön's work and, drawing on a range of relevant psychological theories, I elaborate on why becoming aware of, testing, and changing one's theories-in-use is both useful and a formidable challenge.

In Chap. 3, I present new research and theoretical developments in cognitive science. I focus on Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Grady 1997; Grady 2005) and embodied cognition (Barsalou 1999; Barsalou 2008; Barsalou 2010; Wilson 2002; Johnson and Rohrer 2007; Lakoff 2012). These theories show that some of the fundamental theories that guide individuals' actions are metaphorical links between abstract concepts and sensorimotor experiences. In this chapter, I develop the concept of sensory templates as referring to the way managers model their social interactions as analogous to physical interactions, like pulling a rope, pushing a boulder up a hill, riding your bicycle with the brakes on, removing stones to let a river flow more easily, and so on.

In Chap. 4, I describe nine cases from my own research to illustrate how working with sensory templates can help managers solve seemingly unsolvable problems. I describe the cases in some detail, as it might be interesting for managers reading this book to follow the learning processes of the research participants.

In Chaps. 5 and 6, I look at two new trends within management education, namely the use of art (Taylor and Ladkin 2009) and the use of religious and spiritual doctrines and practices (Delbecq 2013). I argue that the concept of sensory templates can greatly develop our understanding and use of these approaches to management education.

In Chap. 5, I argue that art-based methods can be used both for making managers aware of the sensory templates they use (projective technique) and for finding new sensory templates they can think with—either in classical works of art (illustration of essence) or in the experience of being engaged in art creation for its own sake (making).

In Chap. 6, I focus on the use of religious and spiritual doctrines and practices. As an example, I examine the use of teaching on vices and virtues as it appears in Greek philosophy, Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism. It has been suggested that cultivation of virtue is important to managers as a means of preventing internal forces of human vices in the individual manager from leading to flawed strategic decisions detrimental to the organization, its environment, and the manager's own career (Delbecq 2006). The main argument in this chapter is that cultivation of virtue is not primarily a matter of adhering to a morally good code of conduct, but rather of adopting specific sensory templates from which virtuous acts follow spontaneously and without any effort. Drawing on Tibetan Buddhism, I consider which sensory templates have this effect.

In Chap. 7, I present a collection of practices for working with sensory templates through the use of language and exercises aimed at increasing managers' sensory awareness. I call these practices Somatic-Linguistic Practices.

This book is written for managers, academics, and management educators. The individual reader may belong to one, two, or all three of these categories. Chapters 2 and 3 lay the theoretical foundation for the following chapters. These are written primarily for academics. Chapter 4 contains detailed descriptions of real-life cases. This chapter is primarily written for managers, but will also interest academics who wish to use the detailed case descriptions to further their own theoretical work. Chapters 5 and 6 are written primarily for academics in the fields of art-based methods in management education and management spirituality and religion

respectively and for management educators working with such methods. Chapter 7 is dedicated primarily to practitioners involved with management education. However, all chapters deepen the content of the other chapters.

The ideas presented in this book have been developed through the weaving of my personal experiences in (at least) three areas: my doctoral work with art-based methods in management education, my work as a dance teacher, and my work as a psycho-spiritual teacher/therapist. As it can be useful for the reader to know a bit about my background, I will briefly describe my experience with these three areas.

I did my doctoral work at Cranfield School of Management from 2010 to 2014. The goal of this work was to develop an explanatory theory for the learning processes which can be facilitated by art-based methods in management education. I worked with 60 experienced managers from both public and private sector organizations. My interest in this area arose in 2004, while I was working as a musician and a choral conductor. At the time in Denmark, there had for some years been a considerable political interest in exploring the possibilities of educating artists to facilitate innovation processes in organizations (and other kinds of collaboration between art and business in general). At first, I was very skeptical about this idea. However, by chance, I got the opportunity to facilitate a few innovation processes, and I was struck by how some of the managers present seemed to lack the fundamental ability to get inspired by each other and to capture and develop the ideas which emerged in the moment when meeting new people. I saw how many managers would have formulated ideas in advance which they saw as profitable for their organization and how they would try to push these ideas on the other participants instead of exploring what new possibilities could arise from the meeting. This was a stark contrast to the collaboration processes I knew from co-writing songs and other forms of artistic collaboration and it convinced me that one does, in fact, learn something important from working with art that can be useful to managers. I decided to find out what that something was. After some years of reading and talking to people, I wrote a paper for a special issue of the academic journal *Leadership*. When it got published, one of the editors, Donna Ladkin, offered to be my supervisor and helped me get a Ph.D. position at Cranfield School of Management, an opportunity for which I'm very grateful.

After the first year of studying at Cranfield, I began to get many offers to teach dance (tango and contact improvisation) at various schools and festivals in both Eastern and Western Europe. This led me to embark on a three-year tour around Europe as a dance teacher while simultaneously working on the Ph.D. I used the dance workshops as an informal space for exploring and developing ideas about the links between concrete sensorimotor experience and abstract concepts. In particular, the highly focused contact improvisation practice known as the Underscore (Koteen and Smith 2008, 90–98) had great influence on my thinking. In this practice, dancers are improvising together for several hours. As preparation for this improvisation, the dancers are introduced to 40 or 41 hieroglyphs which refer to different aspects of the dance experience, such as attraction, repulsion, coincidence, confluence, empathy/resonance, collision, engagement, development, resolution, disengagement, streaming, the gap, telescoping awareness, listening, and witnessing, to name a few. I noticed that through the Underscore practice, such concepts can become firmly and consciously grounded in physical experiences of moving bodies. Furthermore, I noticed how the experiences of dancing would appear in other contexts as inner representations of these concepts. For example, the moment I decided to engage with someone at a conference, I felt the familiar inner sensation of moving toward someone and making physical connection which I had become familiar with through contact improvisation. Such experiences led me to develop workshops where managers could learn to develop their understanding of the concepts of leading and following through engaging with exercises normally used to teach tango and contact improvisation (Springborg and Sutherland 2014; Springborg and Sutherland 2015).

Another significant influence on the present book is my work as a psycho-spiritual teacher. Since 2005, I have studied Buddhist meditation and therapeutic processes based on various spiritual practices and on the development of somatic awareness. I studied with teachers such as Claudio Naranjo (Enneagram and Buddhist meditation); Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche (Tibetan Buddhism); and A. H. Almaas, Faisal Muqaddam, Velusia Van Horssen, and Jeremy Klein (Diamond Approach/Diamond Logos). Since 2010, I have taught the doctrines and practices I learned from these teachers to managers, therapists, and spiritual practitioners in London,

Edinburgh, Copenhagen, the Findhorn Foundation, and Warsaw both in group settings and in one-to-one sessions. Doing this work in parallel with my doctoral work made it clear to me that spiritual teaching can be understood as a matter of changing the sensory templates individuals use to experience self, others, and life. Just like the managers who participated in the Ph.D. research experienced that severe organizational problems dissolved when they changed the sensory templates they used to understand these problems, so much of the suffering humans experience is due to the sensory templates they use to understand self, others, and life. In particular, Buddhists hold that seeing phenomena as permanent and as possessing a self-existing substance is a mistaken ontological view (ignorance) and that this is the root of suffering and of vices such as greed and hatred.

It is my hope that this book can be of use to managers as well as researchers and anyone else who wishes to develop deeper experiential insight into their own participation in the problems they face in everyday life and through such insight realize greater degrees of efficiency, freedom, and well-being.

References

Argyris, Chris. 1976. *Increasing Leadership Effectiveness. Contemporary Sociology*. Vol. 7. John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
———. 1990. *Overcoming Organizational Defenses. Facilitating Organizational Learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
Argyris, Chris, and Donald A. Schön. 1974. *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Barsalou, Lawrence W. 1999. "Perceptual Symbol Systems". *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 22 (4): 577–660.
———. 2008. "Grounded Cognition". *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (January): 617–45.
———. 2010. "Grounded Cognition: Past, Present, and Future". *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2 (4): 716–24.
Delbecq, Andre L. 2006. "The Spiritual Challenges of Power Humility and Love as Offsets To Leadership Hubris". *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion* 3 (1–2): 141–54.

———. 2013. "Management, Spirituality, and Religion: Where Do We Go From Here?" In *Handbook of Faith and Spirituality in the Workplace: Emerging Research and Practice*, edited by J. Neal, 689–96. New York.

Grady, Joseph E. 1997. "Foundations of Meaning: Primary Metaphors and Primary Scenes". University of California, Berkeley.

———. 2005. "Primary Metaphors as Inputs to Conceptual Integration". *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (10): 1595–1614.

Johnson, Mark. 2007. *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Johnson, Mark, and Tim Rohrer. 2007. "We Are Live Creatures: Embodiment, American Pragmatism, and the Cognitive Organism". In *Body, Language and Mind Volume 1: Embodiment*, edited by Tom Ziemke, J. Zlatev, and R. M. Frank, 17–54. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Koteen, David, and Nancy Stark Smith. 2008. *Caught Falling: The Confluence of Contact Improvisation, Nancy Stark Smith, and Other Moving Ideas*. Holyoke, MA: Markus Printing.

Lakoff, George. 2012. "Explaining Embodied Cognition Results". *Topics in Cognitive Science* 4 (4): 773–85.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.

Schön, D. A. 1986. "Deutero-Learning in Organizations: Learning for Increased Effectiveness". *The Leader-Manager*, 2–16.

Springborg, Claus, and Ian Sutherland. 2014. "Flying Blind?" In *The Physicality of Leadership: Gesture, Entanglement, Taboo, Possibilities*, edited by Steven S. Taylor and Donna Ladkin. Bingley, UK: Emerald Books.

———. 2015. "Teaching MBAs Aesthetic Agency Through Dance". *Organizational Aesthetics* 5 (1): 94–113.

Taylor, Steven S., and Donna Ladkin. 2009. "Understanding Arts-Based Methods in Managerial Development". *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 8 (1): 55–69.

Wilson, Margaret. 2002. "Six Views of Embodied Cognition". *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 9 (4): 625–36.