



Provoking with high regard – is that possible?

Dr. Stefan Hölscher

Provoking with high regard – is that possible?

Dr. Stefan Hölscher

Feedback is likely the most fundamental and indispensable of all interaction and leadership instruments. We not only use it to get an idea about what is perceived and experienced in our surroundings, but also often utilise it, in order to bring about wished changes in others and in our environment. And even if classically well-given feedback is not always simple and of course not always successful, especially when it is about complex and multi-perspective interaction situations, it is still the method of choice in countless situations. However, everyone is familiar with situations, in which he feels that what he is trying to communicate is not getting through to his counterpart or going down well with him at all, although he has already maybe tried to get his message across on countless occasions and with various strategies. The situation can become especially serious, if one gets the impression, that when something important has to be discussed, that there is a danger, that the person or team, with whom one is dealing, could get stuck on or become exposed to contra-productive ways - and they do so with the best possible intentions. In such a situation, the method of provoking one's counterpart, while at the same time holding him in high esteem, can clear the way for further discussion.

The basic idea of provoking while still holding a person in high esteem, is to portray behaviour, forms of interaction, patterns or dynamics, which are especially annoying or aggravating to another, in a humorously emphasized and provocative manner, in order to highlight them and make the person or team aware of them. In this way, one can bring about a willingness to change with regard to the portrayed phenomena of the respective discussion partner. This method of intervention-employed provoking is particularly useful and sometimes even necessary, if an individual or a group is so embroiled in an unproductive or contra-productive behaviour pattern, that it gets to the stage that the pattern itself runs virtually automatically without them even perceiving it. This means of course that respective person is not in the position to change it in a productive way. A "normal" feedback in the sense of a moderate addressing of the phenomena, is often not enough in such a case, as it does not touch on the ongoing pattern, but rather just bounces off its sides as it were.

Some examples of phenomena and patterns of this type are in principle every contra-productive form of interaction, in which the protagonists involved, as a matter of reflex join in on the pattern, even if they themselves suffer (again and again) from its effects. The following are a few examples of the above-mentioned phenomena: when an employee constantly pesters or pushes others with regard to

his own individual specialist or personal themes and consequently causes so much pressure, that the others thwart him in the end; a management team, in which everyone speaks so powerfully in favour of his own idea, that no communal dealings or decisions are made and hence, the ideas of the individuals involved fall flat; an expert team, in which everyone in meetings tries their utmost to better differentiate, modify and state more precisely what was discussed by the previous speaker, so that within a short time no one has a clear orientation anymore etc.

In such cases it is often necessary to address the perceived phenomena in a more exaggerated and drastic manner, as otherwise it is likely that no chance will exist for either a pause in the pattern or to become aware of it, or even to get out of the “broken in” pattern in the short-term. In order to reach one’s counterpart and to productively muddle in his steadfast pattern, one can and must from time to time drastically overstate the issue even to the extent of bordering on the absurd; at the same time one can use 1:1 associations and images, that involuntarily come to mind, but which are not normally or would rather not be addressed, for example: “This is like being in an arena, it’s like being at a bullfight”, “You have a natural talent for being able to differentiate the discussion themes so much, that after just five minutes, no one knows their head from the toe anymore”, “There’s no getting through to you, no matter what direction I take, I bounce off you like a brick wall and just end up with a bruised head.”

The following misunderstanding must be prevented in this context: The aim of provoking someone in an exaggerated manner, in order to highlight certain behaviour patterns, is definitely not to attack or abuse him. It does not entail: “Putting someone in his place”, “Putting someone under pressure” or “Wanting to force the other.” Such things are not done as a rule, as they tend not to bring about the conditions for an effective resolution of the unproductive patterns. On the contrary, in order to create the conditions for effective productive provoking, it is extremely important to hold the respective counterpart, be it an individual or a team, in high esteem. Respecting or highly regarding the other is by no means an abstract noncommittal approach. If in doubt, one should first ask himself the following concrete questions: “Do I regard my discussion partner highly? Do I respect or at least like him to some extent? Do I believe that he is constructive and competent?” The approach of provoking your counterpart while still holding him in high regard, only makes sense, if one can in all seriousness answer “Yes” to the above questions. As the receiver – especially in critical feedback situations – can usually feel the inner attitude of the sender really well, he will only let the emphasized critical points reach him, if he feels respected as a person and held in high esteem.

A second necessary requirement for the effectiveness of this approach lies in the question: “Do I believe that my counterpart at least has the ability to change something within the relevant topic?” If one cannot give a clear “Yes” to this question, then the provoking or emphasizing makes little sense as a method to initiate a productive change, as the acute danger exists, that one will achieve the opposite of what one intended or at any rate will not cause any improvement at all.

A third important requirement is that if one himself is not just in the relatively neutral third perspective position, but rather joins in on the group (whatever way it appears at that time), that one keeps a distance to the events taking place at all times. If a person is 100% involved and emotionally affected (more annoyed, frustrated, angry etc.), then it is certainly not the best time to begin provoking someone while trying to regard him highly, as the effectiveness of the provoking lies in the fact that every intensification of the provoking is carried out with a little humour and playful light-heartedness, as opposed to being deadly serious, dramatic, threatening or terribly sad.

“Dear colleagues, now we have come together for the third time to deal with this issue. And I am not the only one who is of the opinion, that although we managed in the first two rounds, to meticulously discuss and analyse the things and to come up with a plan of action, we still ended up afterwards continuing to deal just as we had always done before. What therefore do we need to do, to make sure, that we will have a rather exhausting day together, but that the things will remain exactly as they have up to now?”