

## **Inspiring background images and the use of the "theatre metaphor" in professional coaching**

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### **Personality in terms of the theatre metaphor**

The "theatre metaphor" can be used for an illustrative description of a person. The person's life-episodes are transformed into a "play", which enables us to put questions of personality into a framework of time and space. This enables us to differentiate different life-contexts in which the stages, stories, roles and interaction of the participants can be pinpointed. For each person a portfolio for the roles, the plays, the stages and the plays performed on them can be described. These components encompass the personality in action. By carefully scrutinizing these portfolios, we are able to identify the lived personality, but also gain insight into personality-traits remaining hidden in the background, the hidden personality. Together, the successive scenes of life and their qualities build up the life course and its meaning.

Most people are intuitively able to handle metaphors from the theatre-world easily, while contemplating how their life and their personality can be changed. Even people with very little psychological background have no problem figuring out the typical characteristics of their own life scenes and discussing them with their peers. Difficult questions of personality get a flair of being playful, concrete and thus less complex. They become dynamic and manageable again. They can figure out the essential issues and what might initiate change. Working with metaphors in general mobilises creativity in internal processes and in dialogue with others. Based on the theatre metaphor, the "culture" of an organisation can be identified and we can also get a closer look at particular relationships within teams, organisations and sectors. Culture in this context means the culture of economy, which is not represented by the arts or feature pages of the newspapers, but by the business section. The importance of soft skills for a person can be compared to soft factors in the economy.

The culture of an organisation equals the personality of a person as regards his success and satisfaction in the world.

Often we also have to pay a lot of attention to the style of the performance, which means the way something is performed or staged. The style can be a more important characteristic of a person or an organisation than anything else. Actually, whether or not a performance or encounter is regarded as meaningful depends to a great extent on the style.

If someone regularly practices redesigning his life, he is better prepared for situations in which the tides of time have shifted and his interests, opportunities and strong points change accordingly. This exercise is worthwhile because it helps to extract the essentials for a fulfilled life and to

transfer those important qualities to different stages and roles. One is then able to make the circles of life smaller and bigger without abandoning essential properties. In order to do this, it is helpful to know the "ingredients" that allow a professional situation to be experienced as meaningful. Everyone has his own background-profile which he intuitively seeks to match. However, these background-profiles, designs for identity and meaning, are not easy to grasp. This is where a dialogue on background images comes into play.

### **Mental images and professional situations**

By asking relatively simple questions one is able to find out things about the inner background images which act as force-fields and shape professional performance. Before going into further detail about this concept, I would like to trace back the roots of this work.

Thirty years ago I was working in the student's counsellor office, where students asked for my advice when they felt stuck in their studies and unable to make progress. The consulting procedures available at this time didn't really work. A lack of work-techniques or other malfunctions seemed not to account for what happened. Actually, I rather got the impression that these students had lost an important feeling - had lost the "drive", that usually leads people to the next step, even through unknown or difficult terrain. They lacked an answer to the question "Does my current path make any sense?" I felt compelled to start with these students again from the very beginning to pick up the lost or tangled up strings!

During this time, I had just learned about guided imagery, and I tried to contact the students' original images concerning education and profession through imagery. I asked questions such as "What did you want to be when you were young?" Particularly young men tended to give me a relatively narrow range of similar answers and I was not sure whether this would lead us anywhere.

One very typical answer was "train driver". However, more detailed questions revealed characteristic information about the person, e.g. "What mental images/scenes do you associate with this occupation?".

Among the answers were:

1. "Me and my engine - nobody knows it as I do!"
2. "Me and my stoker - two comrades travelling around the world!"
3. "So many people rely on me - I'll get them there safe and sound!"
4. "The Orient Express – Lots of foreign countries. Great uniform! I personally welcome all VIPs at the station."

I was particularly impressed by the last answer. This student's studies seemed never-ending. But he was a passionate part-time worker. What was his job? - Porter in an exquisite livery in a first

class hotel!

New concepts and exercises and new interview methods were developed on the basis of such first steps.

### **The concept of inspiring background images**

Inner images are at work in the background of professional work and identity. They have an impact on which roles and scenarios we adopt, shape or experience as fateful and meaningful. In order to understand which roles we tend to adopt and which stages and plays we are attracted to, we need to explore our own background images. Professionalism without the power of inspiring background images is experienced as shallow and weak and has a hard time creating inspiring force fields. Background images are often related to other times and other realities, so that their meaning for the actual professional situation is not obvious at first glance. It is not important that they are historically true, nor that they are a kind of positive ideal. The very fact that they were adopted and still influence the person in the background shows their relevance and that they represent forces within the person.

These images can originate in one's own family or from distant relatives we hardly know or maybe only from stories. The personal social background, remembered fairy-tales, movies and even dreams may be an important source of inner background images. Based on these images we organise our own personality as well as our relationships with others. This is why it makes sense to get in contact with them, to reframe them if necessary, and to add missing qualities by creating new images.

Professional expertise should tune into such basic patterns of the soul and harmonise with them, otherwise professionalism may remain superficial and/or become a drain on our energy. The basic pattern of methodology used in such an interview is illustrated in the following example:

X works for a consulting agency which successfully deals with top level clients. X can't get rid of the feeling that he can't keep up with the high standard and its demands. Although he seems to master everything well from an outer perspective, he himself is constantly under stress and has the depressing feeling of being a phony, who is about to be revealed. Nevertheless, colleagues and customers are satisfied with his work, although in crucial presentations they also feel that much of his spirit gets lost. With the help of coaching, he now wants to identify and compensate his shortcomings. Since he had had training and counselling on this issue many times before without convincing results, he has no idea what might help him, nor is he very hopeful if he questions himself honestly. When offered, he is very much interested in background images, but is concerned that due to a lack of creativity on his side he would not be able to contribute much.

The following paragraph is a short cut version of the interview:

"What did you want to become when you were a child?"

"A shepherd! I saw it in a movie once."

"Let's assume you became a shepherd and a movie has been made about your life, called 'X the shepherd'. It is being shown at a special cinema for this kind of movie, and a still from this movie is in the showcase outside. What can we see on it?"

"The shepherd is sitting in front of his wagon at sunset, stroking his dog and contemplating the new-born lambs."

"Let's further assume a man and a woman are returning from their evening walk and look at this particular still. While passing by, one can hear them say 'That is an impressive illustration of ...'"

"... how a contemplative life brings happiness!"

Keep this sentence and this still in mind, let's move on to other images, from your family's professional life for instance. Who pops into your mind first?"

"My father. He was a blacksmith."

"Again, let's assume a film was made about his life. What do we see on the still this time?"

"He is absorbed in conversation with a farmer, while both are patting the horse."

"So what do the two passers-by say this time?"

"People still really talked to each other back then."

"Are there any other images that impressed you?"

"My mother's father was completely different. My father and him, well, they didn't fit together. My grandfather was an auctioneer at a vegetable-market."

"His life has been filmed now, too. What can you see on the still?"

"He is standing on a box, throwing himself into pose and impressing the increasing audience."

"So what are the passers-by saying..?" "Here one can see that ..."

"... appearance is more important than reality"

During our conversation, X realizes that most situations his current work don't have the same qualities he is moved by in his background images. Presentations in which he "doesn't hit it off" resemble the scene with his grandfather. Here in particular he feels like a "phony". However, since his major focus is on those moments, he does not take account of other meaningful and successful

parts of his work.

What conclusions can we draw? He becomes aware that being contemplative and in good human contact is important for him to feel right and act convincingly. This gives him a deeper insight into his own core-competences and enables him to value them and present them proudly. Furthermore, if possible he can try to choose roles, situations and stages that are more suitable for his core-abilities and positively put them at the disposal of costumers and colleagues. He need no longer interpret his feeling of not feeling at home during presentations as a deficiency, but as just not having a home game. Nevertheless, he can still play his role on such occasions without demanding too much inner participation from himself on the one hand, but also not distancing himself from his role on the other. Over and above this, he can make friends with the images of his grandfather, integrate their strong points, integrate his strong points, and show more compassion and interest in other people's conversation. Although these powerful images are there, he has (probably because of the polarisation of his father and grandfather), not yet accepted them or used them as power-sources for himself.

This example illustrates that our personality can be complemented by the dialogue with our mental images. Thus our expertise and what is meaningful to us can be harmonised with the requirements and features of our professional situation. This often occurs much faster and more plausibly with the help of images than when other approaches are used.

Here are several more brief examples:

- Here is a scientist, whose work is stagnating. Looking at his background images, he realises that working together with an important other was always a part of his professional happiness. This colleague retired two years ago and was not replaced.
- There is a colleague who needs to reduce her workload because of age. She is not sure whether to do less consulting or less lecturing. Her background images consistently show situations in which a passionate lecturer induces enthusiasm in the eyes of her audience. This clarifies the question.
- Here is a man who was promoted from customer service to a managerial position. He now spends his time behind his desk and in meetings. His background images show people in the midst of a full if somewhat chaotic life.
- We have a manager who, as a woman with fresh ideas, changed her position from women-dominated cloth-production to male-dominated marketing. To her surprise, her performance starts to drop off and she starts to doubt her aptitude for this post. Her background images show communities friendly women who are fond of each other.
- Here is an experienced manager of a global company in need of developmental

improvements. He repeatedly appeals to his employees, but does not show consequent leadership in spite of his competence. His reluctance becomes more comprehensible when we consider his background-images. There is a very striking image from a novel from his adolescence, called "Sea Wolf". The plot deals with the tyrannical captain of a sailing ship who conceals his increasing blindness from his crew. When the crew discovers his weakness, they abandon him at sea.

Finally, I would like to give you an example illustrating the problem of "fit" between individuals and organisations, between personality development and organisational development.

A manager working for an international company that manufactures tools and machines lost his competence, self-confidence and power without understanding why. For years he had been successful as director of a local firm. Due to reorganisation within the company, his responsibility shifted from supervising all sections in one location to one section in several locations all over Europe. Actually, this was supposed to be an improvement in his career and he was fully qualified for the job. However, when he looked into the kaleidoscope of his background images, he began to understand himself better. All of them showed him as the head of a local community. Through the change he had lost the former "fit" between his core-competences and his job, between meaningful attributes of situations and his new responsibility within the company.

Background images are useful tools for intuitively examining whether developments in a team or a company fit the actual developments of the people involved. Sometimes there is no fit from the very beginning, or the fit gets lost because of organisational changes or developments of the individual. In this case, problems of personal development clash with problems of organisational development. These exercises may also be helpful in situations like the example set out above concerning changes in position and responsibility. In this case, they leave the area of training and have a direct effect on the organisational reality. If the "culture" of an organisation allows an appropriate use of this method, then it can become a very powerful tool.

We have developed exercises that facilitate the examination of images related to these issues. Next, you will find such an exercise.

**Exercise on background images: Development of the individual and the organization (time needed about 90 minutes)**

This exercise focuses on the matching of personal development and the development in a team/ an organisation. You can illustrate your background perceptions and attitudes by describing inner images in a sensitive dialogue with other people. You probably gain more the more experience and intuition you have as a professional. Nevertheless, you can begin to access this world of images without specific training. The only important thing is to keep in mind that you are dealing with intuitive speculations and not to confuse them with facts even if they seem strikingly convincing. Offer your intuitions with care and humility and leave it to the recipient to make use of them or not.

## Self-questioning: Images of a team/ an organisation and of oneself

Find a partner! Keeping to the time frame ensures that each has the same opportunities.

### 1. 5-10 min

#### *I. Self-reflection:*

Both of you choose a team/organisation you wish to refer to in this exercise, either an organisation you are in or a partner or customer:

- 1.) Let yourself become aware of images/scenes that mirror **you** in relationship to the team/organisation ("Where do I come from, where am I now and where am I going?"). Intuitively select three images.
- 2.) Let yourself become aware of images/scenes that mirror how you see **your team/organisation** ("Where does it come from, where is it now and where is it going?"). Intuitively select three images.

### 2. 2 x 10-15 min

#### *II. Dialogue with your partner: Decide who starts.*

- 1.) Indicate the team/organisation chosen and talk to your partner about the images of yourself in relation to this team/organisation. While you talk, your partner sits relaxed and is aware of his/her inner responses. Then he/she shares his/her impressions and the images triggered by your report. Don't discuss, just share!

Leading questions for your partner:

- What images are triggered in me while listening?
- What do my images focus on?
- What differences and complements intuitively come to my mind?

- 2.) *Now change roles! Dialogue with your partner (10 to 15 minutes):*

### 3. 15 min

#### *III. Discussing the experience and conclusions.*

Share your experience during the process and the first results. Don't fix things; do not disturb further inner searches.

Leading questions

- 1.) When my inner images of myself confront my images of the team/organisation, what do they tell me about the nature and quality of our mutual relationship? What role do I play?
- 2.) Where do I feel the relationship is harmonious? Where is there a lack of harmony, maybe even conflict?
- 1.) 3.) How do these images reflect my personal development and the development of the team/organisation? Do they correlate? This correlation can also be expressed in metaphors (What pops into mind? - An image, a movie, a theatre play, a song ...?)

## List of literature

The previous writing is based on the following ones.

You can download all these writings from the website of the Institut für systemische Beratung, Wiesloch (Germany) for free: [www.schriften.isb-w.de](http://www.schriften.isb-w.de) (category "I/II – Aktuelle bzw. Ältere Studienschriften").

B. Schmid (2001): „*Persönlichkeit im Beruf als Erzählung*“ (Institutsschrift Nr. 41). Vortrag anlässlich des ersten Weltkongress für systemisches Management 1.-6. Mai 2001 in Wien. In: Schmid, 2004, Kap. 18 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

B. Schmid (2001): „*Professionelle Begegnung und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung im Beruf – eine systemische Sicht*“. (Institutsschrift Nr. 42). In: Schmid, 2003, Kap. 3.1 – 3.3.5 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

In: Zeitschrift für systemische Therapie 04/02.

B. Schmid (2004): „*Seelische Bilder und berufliche Beziehungen*“. (Institutsschrift Nr. 98). Vortrag anlässlich des Kongresses für Tiefenpsychologie in Lindau vom 24.-28. 10. 2004. In: Tagungsberichte der Tagungen der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Tiefenpsychologie (IGT) vom 24.-28.10.2004, Patmos-Verlagshaus, Düsseldorf.

B. Schmid (2004): „*Sinnstiftende Hintergrundbilder professioneller Szenen*“ (Institutsschrift Nr. 93). In: Coaching Tools. Erfahrene Coaches präsentieren 60 Interventionstechniken aus ihrer Coaching-Praxis. Herausgegeben von Christopher Rauen. Managerseminare Verlag, Bonn.

## Other writings and audio-files out of the subject area

You can download all these writings for free: [www.schriften.isb-w.de](http://www.schriften.isb-w.de) (category "I/II – Aktuelle bzw. Ältere Studienschriften").

B. Schmid (2004): *"Seelische Leitbilder im Coaching und in der Organisationsentwicklung."* In: Schmid, 2004, Kap. 18 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

Siehe dazu auch: B. Schmid (2001): *"Persönlichkeit im Beruf als Erzählung"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 41). Vortrag anlässlich des ersten Weltkongress für systemisches Management 1.-6. Mai 2001 in Wien. In: Schmid, 2004, Kap. 18 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

B. Schmid (2005): *"Träume im Coaching"* – Ein Beispiel und ein Leitfaden für kollegiale Traumdialoge (Institutsschrift Nr. 99).

Dazu auch: *Leitfaden für kollegiale Traumdialoge* (Einzeldokument, Schrift Nr. 99.2)

B. Schmid (1998): *"Arbeit mit geleiteten Phantasien und Trance"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 27). In: Schmid, 2004, Kap. 9 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

B. Schmid (1998): *„Umgang mit einschränkenden Identitätsüberzeugungen“* (Institutsschrift Nr. 73). In: Schmid, 2004, Kap. 10 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

B. Schmid, J. Hipp & S. Caspari (1999): *"Intuition in der professionellen Begegnung"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 22). In: Schmid, 2003, Kap. 3.3 (EHP-Handbuch Band I, Details s.u.).

B. Schmid & K. Wengel (2000): *"Die Theatermetapher: Perspektiven für Coaching, Personal- und Organisationsentwicklung"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 37). In: Schmid, 2003, Kap. 3.2 (EHP-Handbuch Band I, Details s.u.).

In: profile – Zeitschrift für Veränderung, Lernen, Dialog, 01/01.

B. Schmid & P. Boback (2002): *"Wirklichkeitskonstruktive Traumarbeit"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 40). In: Schmid, 2004, Kap. 7 (EHP-Handbuch Band II, Details s.u.).

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B. Schmid (2002): *"Das Eigene finden"*. (Institutsschrift Nr. 44) Auszug aus: *"Professionelle Begegnung und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung im Beruf – eine systemische Sicht"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 42). In: Schmid, 2003, Kap. 3.3.6 (EHP-Handbuch Band I, Details s.u.).

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B. Schmid & U. Pannek (1998): *"Der schöpferische Dialog anhand von Träumen"* (Institutsschrift Nr. 69).