Outlook Creates Insight

– when the perspective shifts, the decisions shift

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Many leadership teams make their most important decisions in the same meeting room they run day-to-day operations from. Same view, same chairs, same agenda – and often the same thoughts. So it is hardly surprising that the strategy looks like last year's.

Many years ago I discovered that outlook creates insight. When we move physically and mentally, our perspective moves with us. And when the perspective shifts, the decisions shift.

This article is about why that shift of perspective is so important for leaders – and about being able to do both: Zoom in on day-to-day operations and zoom out to the big picture. Just not at the same time.

Same room, same thoughts

In From Specialist to Leader I wrote about the ability to zoom in and out. Like a camera, we can learn to place our leadership deliberately in the right places at the right time. Zooming in is about the details, the people and operations. Zooming out is about the overview, direction and strategy. But no camera – or person - can zoom in and out at the same time.

That is exactly where many leaders stall. Everyday life keeps pulling the lens in: Emails, meetings, operations, firefighting and the next set of numbers. Even when the leadership team sits down to talk strategy, it often happens between two operational meetings with phones on the table. Then strategy becomes an extension of operations rather than a look beyond them.

The change of perspective does not come by itself. It requires you to shift your attention deliberately – and often your body too. Out of the meeting room, up the mountain, down to the beach or up into the air.

What the research says

It is not just a gut feeling. In 2014, researchers at Stanford University studied what walking rather than sitting does to our creativity. Participants' creative output rose by an average of around 60 percent when they walked – and the effect lingered for a while after they sat down again. Interestingly, walking helped most with open, divergent thinking, while it did not help with tasks that have one right answer. In other words: A walk is good for zooming out – not for double-checking the spreadsheet.

Another Stanford study from 2015 compared a 90-minute walk in nature with a similar walk along a busy road. After the nature walk, activity fell in the part of the brain associated with rumination – the negative thoughts that go round in circles – and participants ruminated less. That did not happen after the walk along the road. When you move in nature, the mental "chewing the cud" diminishes.

Harvard Business Review has also put the spotlight on this. A study of walk-and-talk meetings showed that employees who held walking meetings were more likely to see themselves as creative and engaged in their work. Movement, nature and silence are therefore not a luxury for leaders. They are tools for better thinking.

> *Outlook creates insight – but only if you give yourself time to take it in with all your senses.*

Anholt – my moment of zen

For me it started on Anholt – the most remote place in Denmark and the place I value most in the world. From childhood I learned to appreciate the silence of the warm desert, the scent of heather, the cry of the gulls and the sun making sparkling stars in the roaring sea along the long coastline. My mother's family comes from here, and we have a house on the island. It is also where I fly myself, since becoming a pilot.

Hundreds of times I have watched the sunset from a secret spot on the island and gained some kind of certainty. Perhaps even wisdom: A clarity about what I needed to do, and how. With renewed energy I went home and achieved results. The same happens on the long walks in the silence of the desert and along the sea. As I wrote in a LinkedIn article a few years ago: Not a soul for miles around. The waves whisper little secrets, and the thoughts find peace, step by step. It works.

That is also why we took the young people from Future Leadership Preparedness to Anholt. The module was called precisely "Outlook Creates Insight": Four days in the desert with practical exercises, silence and reflection, where the aim was to teach the young people to put words to difficult feelings and find trust in both themselves and each other.

Mushin and the core

We call on the same inner strength in martial arts when, before training, we close our eyes, breathe deeply and empty the mind of distracting thought patterns. "Mushin" is the name of the state – empty mind, where we are completely open to what comes, or to what we ourselves are ready to create.

But the most important thing is what I call the core: The source from which everything springs. Drive only makes sense if it has a direction towards something important in our lives. A purpose.

I found my own one night in Canada in the autumn of 2014 on a masterclass in presence. I woke at 4 a.m. and could hear the wolves howling under the clear starry sky. I got up and walked alone into the black forest, lit only by the stars and a small candle. In the total silence – broken only by the wolves prowling cautiously around me – my purpose in life suddenly became very clear. In a few hours I drew the sketch for Future Leadership Preparedness. That insight would never have come at a desk.

Silence and fasting in the French Alps

The following year I stood with 14 other business leaders on another masterclass in the French Maritime Alps. We had toiled through wind and rain – 1,018 metres of ascent up Monte Fontanalba – with full packs for 11 hours, combined with mental tasks and exercises. The whole expedition took place in total silence and with a 24-hour fast. A former special forces soldier led the expedition.

At one point we sat down on a mountain slope as the sun broke through and warmed us. An unknown bird sent bright cries through the gorge above the bare rocks. Then it came to me again: The next step. When the mind goes quiet and the view becomes vast, the answers often become simple.

Mont Ventoux – mental training on the way to the top

My experience of finding calm in the eye of the storm - not least as a trained emergency preparedness officer, several years in war in Bosnia and a long business career in management and executive positions - I have since used in my work with countless leadership teams.

In May 2014, under the OLTC banner, we took ten leaders from Christiansen & Essenbæk to Provence on an intensive four-day leadership training programme. The finale was the legendary Tour de France stage to the top of the 1,912-metre Mont Ventoux – 1,617 metres of ascent over 21.8 km. The team had trained with dedication for a long time, and the programme also included canyoning, team tasks in the mountains and, not least, mental training.

Beforehand we held a small, exclusive inspiration session in my living room with Danish Tour de France stage winner Jesper Skibby and a young lad named Emil. Both told brutally honest stories of triumphing over themselves – one from the Tour de France, the other from a 13-year-old's development journey. Food for thought. All ten leaders reached the summit.

The point was not the cycling. It was to use nature as a learning space for both execution and reflection – and to experience what happens to a leadership team when the view from the top becomes the reward for a shared struggle. It was about training. Both together and individually. That applies to cycling as well as to leadership in practice.

The sky is not the limit

Today I often find my perspective in the cockpit as a pilot. From the air the landscape becomes a map where the connections stand out clearly: The roads, the coasts and what lies beyond the horizon. It takes me just under 40 minutes to fly to Anholt from Roskilde. My motto is: "The sky is not the limit; it's a wonderful playground!"

But the view does not have to be from 3,000 feet. When Emil and I were allowed all the way up to the top of the Great Belt Bridge and into the control centre, we both gained a new view of how a huge, complex system fits together. That is exactly the movement leaders need: Up high to see the whole – and down again to act on it, once the surplus of mental strength has been mobilised.

How we build it into leadership programmes

That is why I almost always include the change of perspective, in development programmes for executive teams, managers and middle managers alike. This happens through solo retreat time, among other things, where each leader gets time and space alone with their thoughts, through contemplation and reflection, and through buddy walks, where two leaders walk and talk about what matters. After every exercise there is a fixed reflection and debriefing.

It is part of my 3H method – something for the head, the hands and the heart. The hands are trained in action and execution, the heart in the emotional and relational, and the head in reflection and thinking.

Without reflection, even the most demanding expedition is just an experience. With it, it becomes learning – and better decisions.

This is a deliberate contrast to the simulator, where we train decisions under pressure. Leaders must be able to do both: Act quickly when it counts – and take a step back when it is time to think big.

Five ways to shift perspective

Try it in your leadership team:

- **Move the strategy meeting out:** Away from the operational meeting room – preferably out into nature and up high.
- **Walk while you think:** Use walk-and-talk and buddy walks for the big questions.
- **Create silence:** Set aside solo time without phones for contemplation and reflection.
- **Reflect routinely:** End every exercise and every important meeting with a short debriefing.
- **Zoom deliberately:** Agree when you are in operations – and when you are up in the aircraft.

Three questions for you as a leader

Ask yourself:

- Where do I find my own moment of zen – and when was I last there?
- When did our leadership team last make an important decision somewhere other than the meeting room?
- How much of my time am I zoomed in – and how much zoomed out?

Conclusion – outlook creates insight

When the perspective shifts, the decisions shift – and their quality rises. The research confirms it, and I have experienced it again and again – on Anholt, in the French Maritime Alps, in martial arts, at countless strategy seminars, in the midst of war, from the top of Mont Ventoux and in the cockpit.

Leaders must be able to zoom in and out, but not at the same time. That requires you to shift your attention deliberately and give yourself and your leadership team time and space in nature.

Because outlook creates insight – and the sky is not the limit; it's a wonderful playground!

The article builds on, among others, my LinkedIn articles "Udsigt skaber indsigt" (Outlook Creates Insight, 2015), "Moment of zen" (2023) and "Digitalisering og ledelse" (Digitalisation and Leadership, 2018), the Mont Ventoux programme with Christiansen & Essenbæk (2014), Lokalavisen Taastrup (28 March 2017) as well as Oppezzo & Schwartz, Stanford University (Journal of Experimental Psychology, 2014), Bratman et al., Stanford University (PNAS, 2015) and Clayton, Thomas & Smothers, "How to Do Walking Meetings Right" (Harvard Business Review, 2015).

Does your leadership team need a new view – and new insight?

Cronquist Consult ApS and OLTC create team and leadership development programmes as well as executive programmes where nature, silence and reflection become part of strategy work. Read more here:
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