



Limits that promote understanding

Top managers were either stumbling through the dark or having to deal with total silence: Andreas Heinecke reports on how disconcerting **EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL LIMITS** has been at more than 100 locations around the world.

BY PREM LATA GUPTA

▶▶ Andreas Heinecke has a knack for tearing people out of their daily routine and throwing them into the extraordinary. In his exhibition, “Dialogue in the Dark,” visitors are led by blind guides through specially constructed, darkened rooms, creating a reversal of roles. Since its creation in 1988, the exhibition has been exported successfully around the

world. Some five million visitors have had the opportunity to participate in this amazing experience in which sound, sensation and smell take on totally new dimensions. Heinecke has also dedicated himself to the deaf for some time now, creating a new exhibition called “Scenes of Silence,” which is also a registered trademark. This novel project addresses the idea of communicating

without words, where only facial expressions and gestures are allowed.

You are a regular guest at the World Economic Forum in Davos. This year, you had top managers communicating without being able to use speech or other aids. What should people in leadership positions learn from “Scenes of Silence”?

“High-ranking top managers suddenly realize how dependent they are on cooperation. They become very humble.”

ANDREAS HEINECKE, INITIATOR OF “DIALOGUE IN THE DARK” AND “SCENES OF SILENCE”

We live in egotistical times where a lot of emphasis is put solely on maximizing profits and public image. However, when people suddenly have to act under completely different circumstances—total silence, for example—their attention is going to be focused more on what’s happening on the inside than what’s going on around them. It is, without a doubt, an unsettling situation for people, but it also puts people in a position in which they can assess their own values.

PERSONALITY

Andreas Heinecke is the CEO of Consens Ausstellungen GmbH. The goal of his social entrepreneurship is to promote empathy among non-handicapped people toward the blind or deaf so that the latter will ultimately be integrated as fully valued employees into the workforce of the non-handicapped. Heinecke began his work, “Dialogue in the Dark,” 20 years ago. Since 1996, the concept has been marketed worldwide on a franchise principle. Heinecke’s service has been recognized internationally. He was the first social entrepreneur in Western Europe to be named a Senior Fellow by the Ashoka Foundation in the United States. In addition, he received the Global Social Entrepreneur Award.

The most important people in the world meet at forums like the one in Davos. How does your event fit into such a framework?

We rely on the surprise effect. Our workshop actually stands out from the usual events held there. That’s exactly what the organization committee likes about our concept and why we are invited again and again to regional meetings around the world.

What type of experiences have you had with managers at your workshops?

Well, first of all, they attend voluntarily and thus are basically open minded. However, nobody can imagine the intensity of the situation or anticipate their own reaction when they start out. As their feeling of omnipotence disintegrates, they unexpectedly start running into limits. High-ranking top managers suddenly realize how very dependent they are on cooperation. I’m not exaggerating. Afterwards, many of them are thankful to be able to see or hear at all. They become very humble.

What kind of feedback do you get from participants? How do managers typically react?

They are amazed at how powerful the experience is. Participants spend one and a half hours in total darkness during “Dialogue in the Dark,” and this gives leadership a totally new meaning. During one such event in China, a woman rushed out shortly after getting started because she couldn’t handle the situation. And this is someone who

manages billions of dollars in risk capital in California.

It’s actually a contradiction, isn’t it?

Exactly. I told her that nothing could really happen to her. She finally tried it again.

How much do specific cultural or family backgrounds influence manager reactions?

Everyone is equal in the dark, where professional success and status symbols are invisible. In the silence, it all comes down to body language. Even someone who is naturally reserved, say a Japanese, will have to have physical contact with other people. Listening takes on a whole new meaning.

Do your workshops give an alternative view of modern lifestyles, where communication channels are becoming ever more abundant?

Limiting a person to one or only a few senses provides a stark contrast to the virtual world and its technical gadgets. When you can’t see, your hearing, taste and sense of touch become more intense—that’s experiencing the senses. You don’t experience these senses in the virtual world.

Technology today is replacing personal one-on-one conversations to a great extent. Isn’t a telephone conference also a form of “Dialogue in the Dark”?

No, you cannot compare that to total darkness. When you telephone or e-mail colleagues, you’re still in familiar surroundings



and using familiar technology. Our workshops totally remove the familiar.

In "Scenes of Silence" and "Dialogue in the Dark," visitors are guided by deaf people and, respectively, blind people. What is your motivation in learning from the handicapped and integrating them into the normal workforce?

I am interested in the acceptance of diversities. People with challenges should get the same opportunities as everyone else. Our exhibit is like an incubator of opposites, where seemingly weak people are the strong ones, and people who might appear strong in everyday life experience their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. In this way, we also strengthen values like tolerance and respect.

"Dialogue in the Dark" has been on exhibit in Hamburg for 8 years now. How do you explain this ongoing fascination?

"People who might appear strong experience their weaknesses and vulnerabilities."

ANDREAS HEINECKE

Archetypes are best addressed in the dark because darkness arouses feelings of both fear and fascination. This provides a good medium for awakening interest and creating tension. Having to spend one and a half hours in the dark in an unfamiliar location is very different from just deciding to close your eyes for a while.

Your concept has been exported to 22 countries so far. Is it possible to transfer social involvement beyond national boundaries?

Yes, it works. Since we developed this format, we are in a position to pass on our know-how by training employees locally in each country. The concept is working around the world: from Germany, to Canada, to Jordan. We will have representatives in Mexico soon.

You were named "Social Entrepreneur of the Year" not only for this innovative concept, but because you have been able to make it a successful business. Would you say that charity, in the traditional sense, is outdated?

Charity in terms of making donations and accepting honorary positions has always been very important and will continue to be. I have great respect for the efforts some people make on behalf of others. But I don't see myself as a do-gooder in the classical sense. I'm more concerned with social entrepreneurship. What I do is far-reaching because it can be multiplied. Since it is based on interaction, the concept is also sustainable.