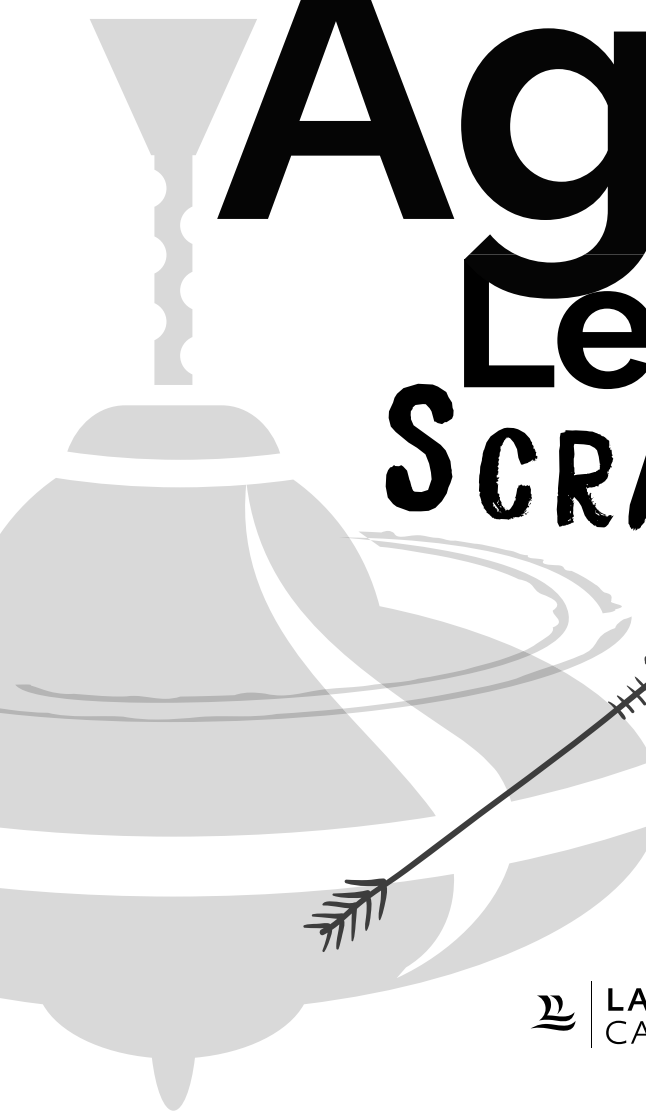
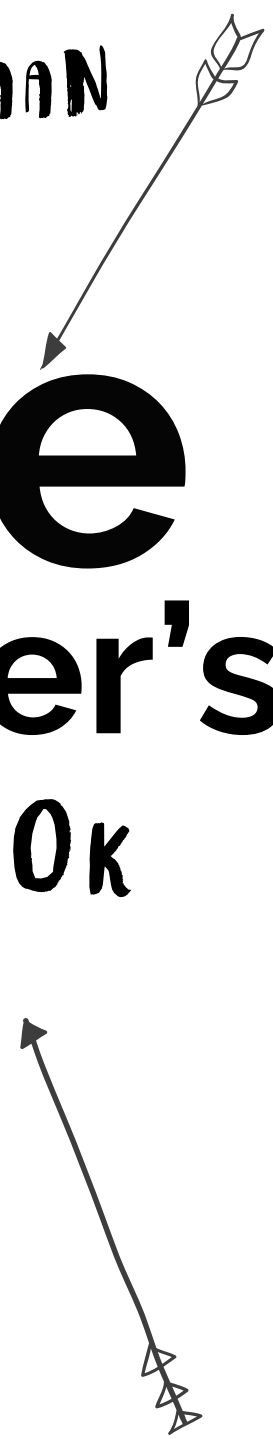


HERMAN VAN DEN BROECK
BARNEY JORDAAN

THE
Agile
Leader's
SCRAPBOOK



 LANNOO
CAMPUS





We dedicate this book to all leaders who
create value to make this world a better place for all.

To our partners, Greet and Mieke,
thank you for your contribution to this dream.

'Master, what are condor pairs thinking when
their youngsters leave the nest?'
'Nothing, really nothing,' said the Master.
'They're not thinking at all.
They look upon their young hopefully
and marvel at how they dive and spread their wings.
And even though their own bodies instinctively
follow the twists and turns,
they let their young fly on their own.
This is the moment the parents have been longing for:
to watch their young soar on the wings of their strengths.'

DARE TO BECOME AGILE!

This book challenges you to rethink the underlying assumptions
of the organisational principles you might
hold dear at the moment.

It invites you to take a critical look at
the sustainability of the managerial logic of the past 100 years
in the light of the turbulence, complexity and uncertainty
businesses of today experience.

Agility is a vast terrain.
It impacts organisational strategy and structure,
as well as operations and people.
Our focus is on eight agility challenges that leaders are commonly
confronted with and that span the entire organisational spectrum.

We hope that some of our assertions
will make you feel sufficiently uncomfortable
to stimulate fresh thinking
towards a better mobilisation of your own talents and skills
as well as those of your co-workers.



Agility

the ability to cope with
and influence environmental
changes in a fast, innovative and
sustainable way

8 AGILITY CHALLENGES

AGILE ORGANISING
UNDERSTAND

COLLABORATIVE CULTURE
CO-CREATE

MANAGERIAL LOGIC
STRETCH

AGILE SKILLS
BEHAVE

BEYOND MILITARY PARADES
TANGO

FAILING WISELY
FEEL

TALENT ON THE MOVE
DIVERSIFY

SHARED LEADERSHIP
DECIDE



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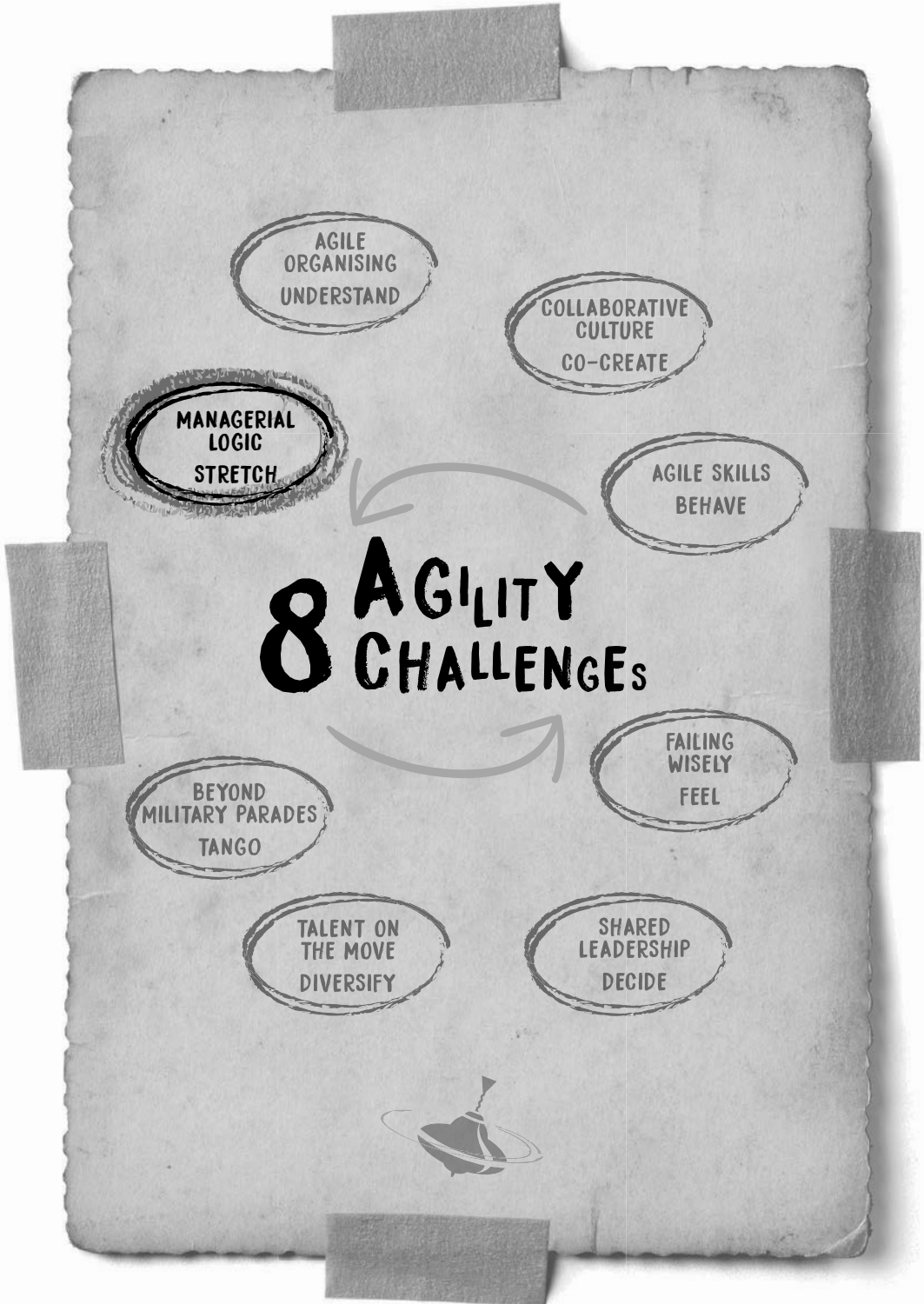
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AGILITY CHALLENGE 1

Stretching YOUR **MANAGERIAL** logic

Agility: the talk of the town

Everyone is talking about agility, but what does it really mean? And why should you turn your highly structured organisation or department into a flexible and nimble unit? Because agility is the flavour of the month? Certainly not!

The concept of 'the agile organisation' is not new.¹ The importance of agility to organisations has been preached before. In the 1990s the principles of the 'learning organisation' were seen as a nice add-on to management practices, which clung to linear thinking patterns – as if all the complex-

ity out there could be reduced to a simplistic five-step model! If you still believe this, we would, as a start, invite you to throw that idea overboard.²

You can't ignore the fact that globalisation and the acceleration of technological innovation have created a **VUCA** world which seriously challenges prevailing notions of management systems and leadership.³

VOLATILE UNCERTAIN COMPLEX AMBIGUOUS

Speeding up while at the same time maintaining the highest quality standards has become the biggest challenge for organisations of all kinds.⁴ The key question is: How can your organisation not only survive, but also grow and thrive in today's volatile reality?

JOIN US IN
**ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS AND FINDING WAYS
TO LET AGILITY SERVE YOU**!

Shaking the foundations

The aim of this book is to make you think about how to introduce agility into your organisation without throwing stability completely overboard. We acknowledge that just *thinking* about agility may frighten you. Creating an agile workplace will lead you to question your current operational processes; it may also challenge your need to keep control, bring up fears of losing power and play havoc with your well-being. You will feel unsure about the impact on, for example, your organisational culture, market position and budgetary implications. In short: introducing agility creates *uncertainty* about the future – your own but also that of your organisation. Rather than neglecting or complaining about this feeling, can you frame it as a great opportunity to become even more impactful? Can you redefine the steep change curve as a great opportunity curve? The frame you adopt will determine the choices you make and therefore the success or failure of your efforts.

If leaders can't overcome their fear of becoming agile, they will straitjacket their co-workers.

Their organisation will continue to walk well-trodden paths and miss the golden opportunities a VUCA world offers.

You need to realise that the tight rules and structures and accompanying control systems that in the past provided long term stability and security, now make your organisation fragile because it is unable to respond quickly to threats and opportunities present in the ecosystem you operate in. Every rule, every structure, every silo is a hurdle that makes change more difficult.

Perfection kills creativity

Most organisations are set up in a way that inhibits change.⁵ We are genetically coded to 'protect' ourselves against threats and we do this by creating as much predictability as possible. No wonder then, that we prefer to organise for repeatable, 'safe' processes.

Indeed, looking at the Western managerial rhetoric of the past 100 years, the emphasis has been on creating profitability through standardisation, stability and predictability; on maximising profit through tight regulation of and control over work processes, over the means of production, and over employees. Creating those strong roots – 'rooting' the organisation – was management's ultimate objective. Even today, we are brain-washed into this traditional mindset.

This mindset has its drawbacks. Meaningful in a context characterised by a slow pace of innovation, it tries to ensure perfection by eliminating errors. But in so doing, it straitjackets people into standardisation, suppresses innovation and creates fear of failure – the very things that kill entrepreneurship. Concentrating only on the rooting process of your organisation makes you rigid and blind to alternative (and often better) ways of doing things.

NATURE IS PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

Nature requires living organisms to adapt to changes in the environment in order to survive. Those that fail to adapt, do not survive.

Bernd Heinrich, in his intriguing book *The Homing Instinct*, writes that Mother Nature understands quite well that perfect mechanisms, in the long term, do not provide the best results. And so Heinrich seconds Voltaire, the French philosopher, when the latter says, 'Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien' ('The best is the enemy of the good').

| Salmon, with almost perfect accuracy, can smell and return
| to their spawning streams of origin. Close to perfection?
| Indeed. In one experiment, 90% of the salmon selected the
| stream with the 'smell of home'. What about those that did
| not make it to their home turf? These 'imperfect' ones often
| adapted to other environments, sometimes even finding
| *better* environments to breed in. For the long-term survival
| of the species, it is good not to be perfect! Imperfection,
| therefore, is nature's way of helping us to adjust to a changing
| environment.

**IN TODAY'S MANAGERIAL LANDSCAPE,
WE HAD BETTER REMEMBER THIS!**

'Because our environment is
changing faster than ever,
trying to optimise for perfection
is becoming a fool's game.'

S. Paju⁶

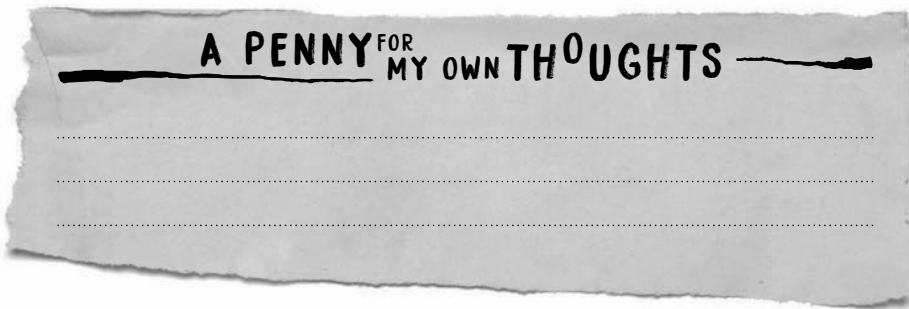
Trees graced with wings?

For a long time, rooting was a good strategy. A stable environment allowed you to rely on your analytical competences to plan for the future with a reasonable degree of certainty. Managing was not too difficult: you had time to plan, time to adjust, even the time to carry the costs of internal political games. Those times are gone.

In a VUCA world, the tighter you make the controls – driven by the illusion that everything can be predicted – the more fragile the organisation becomes. Leading organisations combine strong roots (standardisation and control) with adaptability, dynamism, speed and flexibility ('wings') so that they can also soar; that is, be agile.

Soaring allows you to explore, and adapt at speed if necessary. It is characterised by high levels of autonomy for people across the organisation, trusting co-workers to be entrepreneurial and get on with it. All of this is supported by 'loosely coupled' structures to ensure dynamic rather than tight control.⁷ Agility 'is the new efficiency'.⁸ Indeed, the need for organisations to become agile is here to stay. It means, though, that leaders and managers need both a new mindset and skillset.

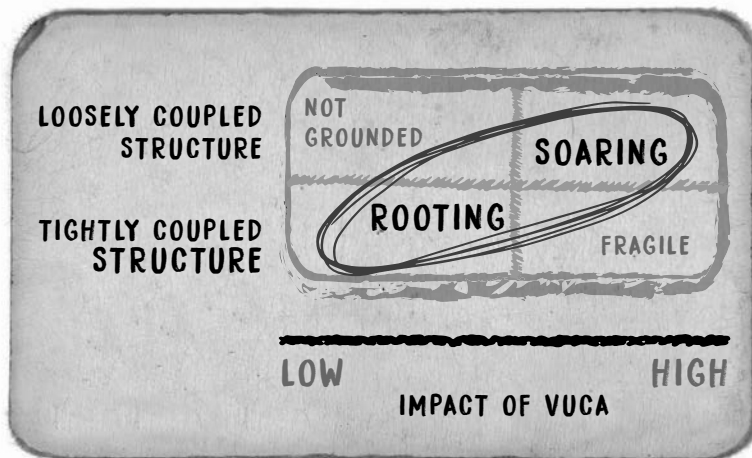
Agile leaders create the space to soar.
Are you up to the task?



The great irony: agility needs stability (and vice versa)

Organising well is about finding the sweet spot between 'rooting' and 'soaring'.⁹ The higher the level of volatility in your organisation's ecosystem, the less tightly structured ('coupled') you need to be to enable 'soaring'. The more stable your environment, the more rooted your organisation – or those parts that are predictable and stable – should be.

Should you try to make that which needs to be rooted more agile, you will end up without a proper structure (i.e. not grounded) and therefore unable to deliver the necessary standardised products and/or services. If, on the other hand, you try to root that which needs to be agile, you will become very fragile, unable to react to changes in the environment.



THE STORY OF THE TANDEM HITCH

At a horse and carriage parade in a resort town on Belgium's North Sea coast, we were fortunate to have an expert close at hand as we watched the graceful procession. We were particularly intrigued by a carriage being pulled by two horses one behind the other, and not alongside each other, as is usually the case. Our expert explained the thinking behind this 'tandem hitch'. The horse closest to the carriage, attached firmly to the carriage shafts, is the 'wheeler'. This is the stronger of the two horses and it does most of the work. The other horse, the 'lead horse', is only loosely coupled with leather straps, and runs relatively freely in front of the wheeler. In days gone by, the idea was that the lead horse should do little work on the journey to the venue for the day's hunt, so that it could arrive fresh before being uncoupled, saddled and used for the hunt proper. The wheeler, who had done all the hard pulling, was left behind, still firmly strapped to the carriage.

Applied to an organisation, the wheeler represents the fixed company structure, which is necessary for the predictable

| work based on acquired knowledge and routines. But this
 | structure alone is insufficient to provide the enthusiasm,
 | freshness and flexibility required to explore the new horizons
 | of the 'hunting ground'. This requires a lead horse that roams
 | free and relatively unrestricted.

Rooting and soaring: a great 'living-apart-together' relationship

The relationship between *rooting* and *soaring* can be seen as a great LAT (living-apart-together) relationship. It is not a symbiotic one, nor are the two elements necessarily in perfect proportion. Let us explain.

First, rooting and soaring, although seemingly contradictory, are not – and should not be – at odds with each other. Your organisation must be both stable and agile, not simply the one or the other. It must 'straddle' the two. The reality is that we frequently encounter organisations in which the wings and the roots compete with, rather than leverage and augment, each other.

Another common problem is that organisations try to tackle their challenge to become agile with the trusted old weapon of standardisation! This is nonsense. Once caught up in the turbulence of a VUCA world, an innovative and entrepreneurial organisation offers more, not less, freedom to co-workers and less, not more, structure and control. The 'agile logic' allows bottom-up, self-organised, goal-oriented activity to emerge.¹⁰ Within this logic, you *win* by controlling co-creation processes; you *lose* when you control people.¹¹

Thirdly, you have to ban umbrella concepts such as 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' from your jargon: they describe everything, yet mean nothing. Why? Well, because these concepts in particular are the idols of rooting; they equate to standardised quality, driven by rules and regulations.

When you promote them in an undifferentiated manner, you are telling people that an organisation will only survive if it has firm roots; in doing so you are (implicitly) restricting them from soaring!

*
**JUST TRY
IT MAY CHANGE
YOUR LIFE**

BE MORE PLAYFUL

Whenever your boss uses the words 'efficient' or 'effective', you should shout 'bullshit!'.

Make clear that you don't understand what your boss really means: does he want more of the same (stronger roots) or a new and innovative approach (soaring to explore)?¹²

Fourthly, be careful of the kind of thinking that wants to perfectly 'balance' rooting and soaring or see it as another organisational formula. Depending on your context, you might need to root more at certain times, while soaring more at other times. Remember that a period of stability offers an excellent opportunity to prepare for soaring – and during a period of soaring, it is probably time to prepare for rooting!

Finally, remember that new information technologies – while they might provide smart integrated data – on their own aren't sufficient to make you agile! Such technologies will in the near future turn all kinds of organisations into 'smart' ones, but becoming smart is as important for soaring as

it is for rooting. Smart organisations get rid of silo databases in favour of integrated ones, thereby also showing how decisions impact the broader ecosystem. They provide integrated, readily available and end-to-end data that can accelerate decision making. Within rooting, these smart feedback loops make a lot of change processes obsolete because continuous adjustments become real time. Within soaring, smart data provides the necessary integrated data to be able to go beyond the status quo.

Smart information systems are merely tools to sustain decision-making processes, they do not, of themselves, make the organisation agile.

Get clear on where your organisation sits right now

To better understand the underlying differences between establishing *stability* and supporting *agility*, you as a leader first need to be clear about your position on two key dimensions. The first, which will come as no surprise, is your position along the 'soaring'-'rooting' continuum. The second is about the kind of impact (added value) you want to have.

STRADDLING SOARING ↔ ROOTING

How open to interpretation should you leave the implementation (the 'what and the how') of managerial decisions? Should you empower and trust your co-workers to be entrepreneurial and to explore new horizons, while relying on their strengths ('soaring')? Or should you tightly anchor operations, meticulously prescribing to co-workers what must be done ('rooting')?

To find the answer, ask yourself how stable and predictable your product, service, operating environment, client segment and applied technology are at the moment. If the information at your disposal tells you that these are all stable and predictable, you can best invest in operational excellence; that is, *build for consistency – continuity – stability – realism – certainty – standardisation – compliance*. So, you 'root'.

The moment you have any uncertainty or lack of clarity on this question, you should shift to the left of the spectrum: *design for entrepreneurship – exploration – innovation – disruption – trial-and-error – risk taking – nimbleness*; that is, allow co-workers to 'soar'. Guided by a clear vision and some agile decision-making principles, co-workers should be allowed to form small, multidisciplinary teams to collect and share information, as well as develop innovative and disruptive ideas and be given space and resources to experiment with these. Tap their hidden talents and allow them to take off and soar to new horizons.

Soaring is about dealing with, and even influencing, environmental changes in a fast, graceful and innovative way. It is characterised by an alertness to changes in the environment through frontal and peripheral vision, combined with the ability to rapidly adjust direction. It allows for progress despite uncertainty and helps to adapt 'on the go'.

SOARING ↔ ROOTING

How painful is this straddling for you?

Do you have endless discussions between rooters and soarers about alleged unfairness when some get a more flexible regime than others? Complaints from your innovative project teams that they are suffocated by the confines of the rooting logic? Don't you have any alternatives to move beyond your traditional rooting tools and concepts in your attempt to become more agile? Ideally, you shouldn't be having these kinds of dis-

cussions because it isn't about whether rooting or soaring is better – this is typical 'either-or' thinking. You should rather think 'and-and' as rooting and soaring can go hand-in-hand. Here's an example a frustrated HR officer shared with us where a rooting logic prevailed over an opportunity to introduce flexible work practices (i.e., soaring):

'Top management together with the unions decided to allow people to work from home from time to time. Yet we had to install a tight control procedure. Co-workers have to apply well in advance and in a prescribed form – approved by their boss – explaining precisely what they will do at home. If approved, strict terms are imposed (e.g. ½ day a week). Why can't we just trust our co-workers to decide among themselves? This will help each case to be judged on its own merits in a way that accommodates the individual's and the team's needs to ensure that the job gets done. But management and unions are very short-sighted when it comes to empowering our co-workers.'

STRADDLING: EXPANDING VALUE ↔ PULLING IN VALUE

Whether you are soaring or rooting, your aim is to have impact and to create sustainable value, correct? We refer to this as your 'ripple effect'. Unfortunately, 'value creation' is yet another umbrella concept of the traditional managerial jargon. What does it mean? Value for whom? Is the goal to optimise value for the organisation and its shareholders so that it can be stronger, better and more profitable than all the rest – in other words 'pulling in value'? Or are you looking for sustainability by creating added value for a broader whole? In other words, a holistic eco-perspective whereby you are 'expanding value' both within and beyond the organisation?