You do You

And the right people will take notice

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Find the courage to step out of the rat race

Find the courage to step out of the rat race

As we are writing this book, we are imagining who might be reading it a few months from now. When we close our eyes, we're seeing different kinds of people with it in their hands. Some of you might pick it up at an airport kiosk, right after you've been hustled through security and just before you're rushed onto the plane. Others may order it online when you have finally sunken into the couch after a long day to do some online shopping because it's the only opportunity you ever get to do that.

It's not hard to imagine the person reading these pages just the tiniest bit out of breath. A pulse that is just slightly too high for the amount of action the body is getting. A brain that is just a little bit too tired to thoroughly process these words, and a mind that is wandering off to a million other things that are still on the to-do list. And yet here you are, choosing to commit the precious few hours you have to this book.

You bought this book with certain expectations in mind. Whether you're an entrepreneur, a manager, a director, or a creative: you want to learn something from these pages that will help you run, create, or manage a good business. And here we are, starting our first chapter with a title that sounds a little new age-y or even counterproductive to what you might have in mind. But we promise you, at absolutely no point in this book will we be suggesting you leave your job behind to trek the Himalayas. Stepping out of the rat race is not the same as quitting.

Keeping up with the Joneses

Despite having been around for much longer, the term 'rat race' saw a surge in popularity in American literature of the 1950s, and it was no coincidence that the phrase 'keeping up with the Joneses' was introduced around the same time. In a relatively prosperous Western society, people started to redefine what a good life should look like. Increasingly, the focus shifted from 'having enough to live well' towards 'having more than the others in order to live better than them'.

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The definition of the 'rat race' concept today, according to the Cambridge dictionary, is still the same: "A way of life in modern society, in which people compete with each other for power and money." Only our modern society doesn't really look like the '50s anymore. We don't just have to keep up with the Joneses next door: the entire world population has become our neighbours. And this affects us way beyond social-media induced jealousy or FOMO (fear of missing out). It bleeds into our professional lives as well.

In the world before globalisation and the digital revolution, people who had good careers were often big fish in a small pond. Their companies were local, and competition for their jobs was geographically limited. The perception of their success was geographically limited too. They only compared themselves to relatively small numbers of people. Today, most people feel like small fish in a gigantic ocean. If their companies haven't expanded globally, they are at least competing on a much larger scale than ever before. People are becoming replaceable almost as fast as jobs are becoming expendable. We've never had to work so hard to just maintain the status quo.

And even if we do keep our jobs, rarely do they measure up to our new standard of 'success', which compares our level to that of hundreds of thousands of international peers. Just a couple of decades ago, we wouldn't even have been aware of all these people, but today they somehow feel like our direct competitors. It's easy to imagine how even a very successful business owner in a European country might start feeling like a failure when they compare themselves to a twenty-something entrepreneur behind a unicorn start-up in Silicon Valley.

The competition might be real, or it may just be something we created in our heads. Whatever the case, the media's focus on those very rare and very extreme success stories isn't helping us feel less threatened. We are (willingly or unwillingly) taking on ever larger workloads to stay competitive. We feel pushed to do more in less time and to be always-on.

Twenty-somethings fall prey to a quarter-life crisis because they haven't made any '30 under 30' lists. Forty-somethings are panicking because the world is changing at a faster pace than their minds and lives can keep up with. Chronic stress is making us unhealthy and emotional exhaustion is making us unhappy. Is it any wonder our newspapers are filled with alarming stories about rising burnout and depression rates, across all generations?

Take a minute and count to 10

So far, we've told you nothing new. If you picked up this book, you already know we somehow got stuck in a place that is not good for us. Most of us are aware that we need to change something. Ironically though, doesn't it seem like the harder we try to do that, the worse off we generally are? How many books have you read so far that promised to help you figure things out and do things in a better way? (In light of that it feels appropriate to say: thanks for not losing hope and for picking up the book you're holding in your hands right now!)

The world has changed radically: at best that makes us feel vulnerable, and at worst outright threatened. Whenever human beings feel this kind of fear or powerlessness, our nervous system is wired to activate the fight-or-flight mechanism designed to keep us safe. In our current world of hyperactivity – one trigger following the next in the course of seconds, all day long – this seems to create two recognisable and distinct groups in our current society.

On the one hand, there is the group of people who remove themselves from the situation that makes them feel threatened or fearful. They might experience a trigger of such proportions that they see no other solution than to quit working altogether or literally move to another part of the world. On the other hand, there is the group of people we'll call the fighters: their automatic reaction to fear is facing it head-on with bared teeth and clenched fists, ready to rumble.

The most worrying issue with this neurological parallel is that the more frequently the fight-or-flight response is activated in our brains, the more likely it is to be activated again. It will take less to activate it and the response will be more forceful. In other words: people who flee a situation and subsequently encounter another fear trigger will react by closing themselves off even more from society. While the fighters, with each new trigger they are confronted by, will react by fighting harder and harder, and ironically contribute even further to the hyperactivity of our world.

The problem with both of these reactions is that they are based on instinct, and in that sense they are not 'on purpose', or mindful, as they say. The reactions happen automatically, and we're often not even aware of them. Moreover, the deeper we go into one automatic reaction after the other, the more we create a tunnel vision. It seems like our reactions are not only inevitable, but that there is no possible alternative at all.

It's evident that with every profound change in our world, human beings need to adapt. Fleeing from or fighting these changes, however, are not long-term strategies. They won't lead to the adaptation that we need in order to survive and preferably even thrive in the process. That is the point of view from which we would ask you to read not just this chapter, but this entire book. Yes, we see the changes that took place in our world and the grave impact that has had on our society. That society – whether you like it or not – is built on the foundations of business, so the changes have an immense impact on business, too. That is the cause of the discomfort you might be feeling, the doubts you might be having, or whatever other feeling that made you pick up this book.

This book wants to make you aware of the role that the fight-or-flight mechanism is having in your career or in your company, and help you identify the specific tunnel vision that has been created as a result. Our personal (or company) history determines our view on how things are and what is possible or realistic, because our brains look for patterns to keep us safe and to use less energy. In this way, we create limits that are invisible to everyone but ourselves, and these limits are holding us back from seeing what is really there: the real challenges, but also the real opportunities.

The world has changed, but it is our tunnel vision that is holding us back from evolving and growing to survive and thrive. To become aware of our blinders, of our unconscious bias, we need to deactivate our fight-or-flight mode and force ourselves into a state of calm collectedness. We need to count to 10 to quiet our hyper(re)active brains and take the time to really see all the options.

The company struggle

Perhaps the previous few pages have made you double-check the back cover of this book. No, you didn't accidentally pick up a personal development book and don't worry, we'll leave your personal life out of it. But there are so many parallels between what individual people and professionals are going through and what we see companies struggling with that we have to go there. Because more often than not, the stories of those individuals are intertwined with the stories of the companies they work for or manage.

This book is for those who wish to be fully present and aware in our current reality; those who wish to adopt a clear-headed perspective that realistically assesses the difficulties but at the same time is open to all the untapped opportunities that lie beyond their current imagination.

The frequently brutal pressure people experience at work doesn't come out of thin air. Managers aren't voluntarily pushing their team members to the brink of exhaustion. Business owners aren't laying off people for the fun of it. They too are grappling with the repercussions of the digital revolution and related globalisation. They too are now finding their previously manageable marketplace flooded with new competitors.

When business professionals react to fear or powerlessness with a fight-or-flight response, it seems like these responses are somehow linked to success or failure, respectively. It is often perceived or experienced that if a person is burnt out, quits their job, or goes looking for their purpose outside of their industry (or business in general), they have somehow failed. Meanwhile, business professionals who get stuck in the 'fight' loop of working tirelessly towards 'harder, better, faster, stronger' are applauded for their guts, courage, and determination.

The business world is currently flooded with well-meaning advice coming from consultants or gurus who are unwittingly – and thus not malevolently – further stoking up the fire that ignites the fight-or-flight response. It steers us into a vicious cycle where it can sometimes feel like the ultimate goal is to 'destroy' all the competition. In their irrational urge to fight, businesses have adopted a war strategy. It is not enough of an end goal to thrive; success can only be achieved through the annihilation of all others. In the worst cases, this culture of 'beating the competition at any cost' is making otherwise decent human beings make ethically questionable decisions, and that is just bad news for everyone.

Let's be clear: this book is not for those who want to ruthlessly Sun Tzu their business to the top, nor is it for those who dream of changing the world into a utopian place where our current difficult challenges don't apply. This book is for those who wish to be fully present and aware in our current reality; those who wish to adopt a clear-headed perspective that realistically assesses the difficulties but at the same time is open to all the untapped opportunities that lie beyond their current imagination.

With this book, we want to show you that the fight-or-flight mode, however indispensable it can be to our survival, is actually handicapping our brains when it comes to building strong brands and companies. We want to encourage you to deactivate the mechanism, even if it's just for long enough to read the remaining pages of this book, to see the world of opportunity that lies outside of your bias.

With this book, we are not opposing all the other advice you've ever received