



Reveal your authentic self

From the day we are born until the day we die, we face an endless series of welcome and unwelcome life changes. How do we discover or develop the resilience that is necessary to live our lives to the fullest, make our unique contribution, find our calling?

In a series of six interviews, Klaartje van Gasteren, Marix Reijmerink and Jakob van Wielink – and Anne Verboekem-Oerlemans for this interview -, talk to known international thinkers, all of whom show that the road leading to our talent and potential also lies in discovering and recognizing our vulnerability. Some of them have had to endure experiences that seem too overwhelming to survive.

These are six stories of six people who have come forward and that invite and challenge the reader to do the same.

This is the second part of an interview with George Kohlrieser, former international hostage negotiator, distinguished professor of leadership and organizational behavior and author of the bestseller *Hostage at the Table. How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance*.

Another dialogue with George Kohlrieser

You are free to choose

“People who have a network of *secure bases* are able to constantly discover new things and demonstrate a playful attitude towards life up to an advanced age. This is the foundation for the development of self-esteem and the realization of true success. Our secure bases teach us to confidently connect to other people and to goals,” Kohlrieser says. At important moments in his own life, he felt secure bases at his side that gave him the confidence he needed and challenged him to find and live out his true calling.

This ultimately led him to where he stands today: at the head of one of the world’s most successful leadership programs at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. As part of this program, he is probably the first to stress the importance of emotional availability and dealing with loss within the context of leadership. This development has substantially altered the field of leadership.

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In a previous edition of this magazine, we published the first part of the interview we conducted with George Kohlrieser. He has four children, one of whom passed away, he works as a clinical and organizational psychologist, he is a former international hostage negoti-

ator and an endowed professor of leadership and organizational behavior at the IMD. He has written two international bestsellers about leadership: *Hostage at the Table* and *Care to Dare*. Trust is one of the basic elements of the Secure Base Leadership approach that

Kohlrieser writes and teaches about. We spoke with Kohlrieser about the trust he has in his own life and how it has shaped his life and his leadership.

Kohlrieser grows up in America. "I lived a farmer's life, which meant working seven days a week and being outside all the time. Luckily, it was not all work I had to do. There were plenty of special social moments as well. We ended our days around a campfire, ate together and butchered the animals we had cared for together." At the farm, he came face to face with loss at an early age: the loss of a pet or an animal he had cared for. "My grandfather in particular taught me about the emotions that come with loss. He would cry when a crop was lost to drought or too much rain. He showed me that afterwards, there was room and focus again for next year."

What has been a crucial experience in the development of your personal leadership?

"An important experience was when I left home at the age of twelve to go to the seminary. That was the first time I truly felt the pain of loss: the loss of the closeness and security of my family. It was a major change to go from the security of a farming family to a seminary. I was one of the youngest children there and had to carve out a place for myself."

Was it your own choice to go to the seminary?

"Yes and no. Yes, I specifically remember I wanted to go to the seminary at that moment. No, because it was a dilemma between that and not wanting leave my childhood home at such an early age." As the oldest boy in a Catholic family, he felt a certain social pressure. "My mother was thrilled that I wanted to become a priest, because the job had a certain social status. My parents never told me to go, but they were clearly happy with my choice."

Life at the seminary has had an enormous impact on him. "I learned to live with what we have right now, rather than what we wish

for. I discovered that you have to keep moving through the pain of loss. You should know that we started with sixty-eight boys in a single class at the seminary. More and more of them left as time went on." By the time he decided to leave a decade later, only fifteen of the original sixty-eight were left. In the end, only two of those fifteen actually entered priesthood.

What was the hardest thing for you to leave behind when you left the seminary?

"The wonderful lifestyle there. The singing, the rituals, the processions, the parades in honor of the Virgin Mary. It all offered a powerful emotional experience that is hard to find outside that particular environment." Yet he also felt suffocated, as if he could not express himself fully. "I realized that this was not my calling. It was up to me to keep looking for it."

There was one specific priest, Father Ed, who played a major role during this time in his search for his new calling. "When he learned that I was struggling, he said the following simple, yet powerful words to me: *'You are free to choose.'*" Kohlrieser says: "Looking back on it now, that was the origin of the hostage metaphor that has become so characteristic of my work: you do not have to let yourself be taken hostage. What I mean is that you can make choices over and over again and that your emotions should not keep you in a place where you do not or no longer belong."

It was a struggle to find a new calling. "Growing up on a farm, there was no money to go to college after I left the seminary. I had to work to pay for my education." After acquiring a bachelor's degree in philosophy, he switched to psychology. During that time, he met a doctor who would have a crucial impact on the rest of his life. "He knew that I faced a dilemma: should I study medicine to become a psychiatrist or should I stick with psychology? He asked me a fundamental question: *'Do you want to talk to people or do you want to prescribe medication?'* For me, that question had a clear answer: I wanted to talk to people,

so I completed my study of psychology. After acquiring my degree, I studied with Carl Rogers. From there, I sought out new teachers all the time whom I could learn from, such as Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Stan Grof, James Lynch and many others."

Was there a specific point in your career at which you decided to work with loss?

"It was during my police work. After I graduated, I wanted to work with domestic violence interventions. I found a job at the police, where I learned that stress is an important factor in violent situations and, further down, it was always about loss in some way. It was not hard to connect the dots." Linking stress to loss was unusual at that time.

At the police force, he was seen as an important person for officers who has experienced a critical incident. His chief asked him to establish an incident program: "During the stress management sessions, we determined whether participants were able to access and express their emotions, e.g. by crying, and if they could recognize grief. For many of them, their difficult job had a negative impact on their personal relationships. We saw that the stress of the job combined with their struggle to express emotion ultimately inhibited them from connecting to their own children and partners. The challenge for them (and for me) was to teach them to grieve."

Even before earning his degree, Kohlrieser established a counseling center. "There were nine therapists in total who offered family therapy and stress management. We also established a police program for critical-incident interviews and a program for police officers who struggled with their job. During these programs, it became clear over and over again that, in the vast majority of cases, stress was somehow connected to loss."

When did you make the switch to Leadership?

"In 1993, my son Doug was killed in an accident. He was studying medicine at the time. That was a turning point in my life and undoubtedly the biggest loss I have ever experienced. At the time, I was already working with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. I sought her out as a friend as well. She taught me so much about dealing with loss. One of her most powerful lessons was that I would not be honoring Doug's memory by grieving, but rather by living my life to the fullest. The work I do with leadership today is also a tribute to him.

When Doug passed, I was already spending a lot of my time in Europe (since 1979). At that point in life, I suddenly felt how my constant travelling was affecting my

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environment. I made the choice to settle in Europe, I taught Transactional Analysis and gradually moved towards conflict management. In 1998, I was invited by IMD in Lausanne to teach a course on conflict management for leaders."

Following the success of this workshop, he was asked to contribute to the development of a leadership program for IMD. For him, it was essential that the program contained an emotional connection. "Leaders do not come here to learn what they already know. They want an emotional experience. That is, they want to be touched, learn something and experience what they could never get from a book. When they leave again, the experience has changed them and allowed them to grow in their leadership." A prototype leadership program was developed that ultimately grew into today's successful international High-Performance Leadership Program.

When asked what he learned during the first program, his answer is clear: "I learned that I had something special to offer and that this

approach to leadership was unique. Daring to talk about loss and emotions and, above all, working with them, learning to express them and making them experienceable. Learning to work with loss became one of the unique elements that sets this program apart. For most leaders, it comes as a revelation just how powerful loss can be in organizations and in people's personal lives as a motivator of behavior."

During the development of the program, Kohlrieser received unconditional support from IMD. "I think they knew I was doing something special and there was no hesitation or excessive carefulness." Even though they did not always necessarily understand what he was doing or how it worked, their message was clear, he says with a big smile: "I don't know what you are doing, but keep doing it. This year will mark the 100th program. Who could ever have imagined that?"

What is the biggest joy of this program for you personally?

"Working with the program coaches. When we are together, you can feel the camaraderie. The most important thing, however, is hearing participants' stories about how this experience has changed their lives. Stories from immediately after the program, from two or three years later, or even longer. It makes me feel like I am doing something that truly matters. It gives my life meaning and allows me to live my calling. It lets me take risks and challenge myself to do something that has a real impact."

Conclusion

Listening to Kohlrieser's story, it became clear just how important trust was to his ability to discover and live out his true calling. He invited us into his life and showed us that, at crucial moments, there were always people around him who gave him the support he needed to do what he had to do. His story invites us to connect more strongly to our own secure bases and allow ourselves to be challenged to live our own calling.

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