

## 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 Gastelen, Mamix Reijmerink and Jakob van Wielink – and Anne Verbokkem-Oerlemans for this second 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 second interview is with George Kohrieser, 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*.



photographer: Paul ten Broeke

# How women and men connect

**Our past experiences with our parental guardians and caregivers form the foundation of our (personal) leadership. The level in which they preceded us in their willingness to show themselves and challenge us determined how we learned to connect and handle our vulnerability. On a deeper level, it determined our ability to view the world with an open heart, therefore enabling us to experience life's true beauty. Each person's journey is unique and certainly varies between men and women.**

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We are dedicated to the theme of female leadership. What is, after all, the difference between how women and men take leadership over their lives and how they shape leadership in the world around them? In our work, we are deeply influenced by the thinking of George Kohlrieser. During his visit to the Netherlands for the presentation of the translation of his second book *Care to Dare*, we invited him for spirited discussion.

It's Monday morning on the 8th of November 2018 when we meet with George Kohlrieser in Amsterdam. He is a husband and a father to four children, one of which is deceased. Kohlrieser is a clinical and organizational psychologist, former international hostage negotiator

and Distinguished Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. He is the author of two international bestsellers on leadership: *Hostage at the Table* and *Care to Dare*.

## **Bonding in leadership**

The role of leaders is increasingly focused on the coaching of employees in harnessing their full potential. For this potential to reach full maturity, it is essential for leaders to create an environment in which trust and security go hand in hand with inspiration and challenges. It is becoming increasingly clear that the creation of such an environment rises or falls with emotional availability for others, the lea-

ders' actual capacity to connect and in doing so form a secure base for their employees. Kohlrieser describes a secure base as a person who, or a place, objective or object that creates a sense of protection, security and care. At the same time, it is a source of inspiration and energy so that we are able to explore, accept challenges and dare to take risks.

"Bonding is an exchange of energy between individuals whereby one person has an effect on the other:

positive or negative", according to Kohlrieser. Kohlrieser identifies this as the difference between men and women: "Research has shown that men often struggle more in forming bonds than women. Women have something of an advantage in the creation of these emotional bonds, not necessary owing to genetic aspects as much as socialization."

### **Men must learn to bond**

"The foremost reason for failure under leaders is that they fail to bond", says Kohlrieser. "They are not, or not sufficiently, emotionally available. Based on the inability to bond, we often see losses that haven't been grieved." This is where Kohlrieser reveals a difference between men and women: "Many men have no contact with the loss and the pain, and have difficulty expressing this." He explains that male leaders filling high positions in Switzerland committed suicide because they were unable to express their grief and were unable to connect with their environment in this. Kohlrieser emphasizes the danger in concealed grief: "Men often carry grief with them that they are unable to place, that they are unable to put into words. This has major repercussions for one's physical and mental health alike."

When asked if the same applied to women, Kohlrieser was clear: "Women are often more capable of reaching out and seeking social

contact and are less devoted to proving themselves in this. They are more prone to discussing their emotional life with other women."

Kohlrieser sees the ability to see beauty as one of the other significant differences between men and women: "Men run the risk of losing their ability to see life's beauty. Men carrying concealed grief are often unaware of what

died within themselves. This leads to them going through life without experiencing the beauty of nature,

## Examination of one's own history is the responsibility of every leader

music or art, for example." Kohlrieser adds: "Women have a greater capacity for seeing beauty as they have a natural connection with inner beauty. A man is less conditioned to view himself in terms of beautiful or attractive."

Men, therefore, are more at risk of being held hostage by concealed grief than women and more at risk of losing contact with life's beauty. Emotional availability is essential to leadership and, as an extension, to permit contact with your own emotions. "Having, and showing, emotions is a strength" says Kohlrieser. "You often hear men say: if I show emotion, I am not a good leader. The opposite is true: access to your emotions, the ability to cry, and the ability to express anger is a strength when you are able to do so from your masculinity.

This is why it is important for men to learn what it means to be a man from other men." It is essential to this that men make contact with life's painful experiences and the accompanying emotions. This allows them to discover how these experiences have shaped them and contribute to the capacity for experiencing empathy for others.

Kohlrieser made his own journey, where he learned how to be a man from his own male role model. His grandfather showed him how

to experience and express emotion. If a harvest was lost to a draught, he allowed himself to shed tears. He learned that you were able to cry without being held hostage by the emotion. He learned how to regain focus and faith in the coming year and next harvest after expressing these emotions. He learned how to accept life for everything that it was, the good and the bad.

### Women must learn to face conflict

We learn from Kohlrieser that women struggle less than men with the inability to show vulnerability and put experiences of loss and grief into words. What does he consider a challenge for women in terms of leadership? "Women must learn to face conflict, maintain an open dialogue and be comfortable being brave in this and push back where necessary" says Kohlrieser. A woman learns the foundation of this concept

from her father:

"Fathers teach their daughters how to express themselves, negotiate, confront and encourage them in this.

This isn't neces-

sarily "holding your own" explains Kohlrieser, "but rather learning to fight for something, to stand up as a woman and to not want to look like the man. In Jung terms, it's about the balance between the animus and the anima, the masculine and the feminine." In terms of the societal changes concerning femininity and masculinity, Kohlrieser adds: "There is a good deal of confusion surrounding what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman; gender is increasingly fluid."

Kohlrieser's story draws out memories from my own lifeline, shares Anne. Raised as the youngest daughter and sister to three older brothers, in this family she learned a good deal about fighting with men (literally). She le-

arned less about bonding with women, simply because there was a shortage of them within her family structure. Her only sister passed away shortly after birth. On the development of her leadership, she had to learn how to connect with her femininity and with women in her surroundings in order to take the lead over her own life as a woman.

### The task of men and women: investigating one's own history

"It is crucial, for men and women alike, to explore the relationship with the mother and the father", according to Kohlrieser. Investigating one's own history is the responsibility of every leader. With the willingness to grieve the losses in our life and accept the emotions, we develop our emotional intelligence and are more capable of empathy in our leadership role. Every leader may consciously select a

male or female coach."

When we ask Kohlrieser about his legacy, it involves "the role of unresolved grief and how this influences the behavior of leaders, both

male and female. My greatest joy is hearing how leaders shape transformation by forming profound connections with secure bases."

### In closing

During our conversation with George Kohlrieser we experience, as authors, what our own task is as women in learning to face conflict and take risks. We discover that the connection of the femininity and masculinity in our leadership is a continuous study of our past, present and future. Men and women have a separate responsibility in terms of leadership. Men in their journey to accepting vulnerability and women in their journey to facing constraints and conflict. Both function as a gateway to bonding.

"My greatest joy is hearing how leaders shape transformation by forming profound connections with secure bases"

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