

# Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

## A STORY ABOUT DEALING WITH AMBIGUITY



The directive from management is a classic: "Florian, we need to modernize the shift models. But we mustn't lose anyone. And costs mustn't increase."

I read the email three times and notice how my brain reflexively tries to turn it into a definite problem. A goal. A clear solution. A plan.

But there's no single, clear-cut problem. There are three conflicting goals that are all supposed to apply simultaneously. Welcome to real life.

I'm sitting at my desk in the small office above the warehouse. The windows overlook the yard, the containers, the forklifts weaving between pallets. It's this view that reminds me: this is about people, not models.

At 2 p.m. I have a meeting with HR and the plant manager. I've made notes. Three options. Strengths and threats. I want to be prepared, but I know: today's meeting won't be about "we've found the solution." Today's meeting will be about "we can handle disagreement."

Documents, water, and pens are laid out in the meeting room. HR is already there, friendly and expectant.

The plant manager seems nervous. I know why he's nervous: he's bearing the cost pressure.

"Florian, what is your suggestion?" he asks after a brief greeting.

I take a breath. "I have three options. And frankly, each one comes at a price. We can't pretend there's a miracle solution."

HR nods. "Let's go through them."

Option 1: Flexibility via annual working time accounts. Advantage: more flexibility. Risk: overwork and instability.

Option 2: Three fixed models with choices. Advantage: Stability, transparency. Risk: Reduced responsiveness.

Option 3: Pilot project with a hybrid model in two teams. Advantage: Learning on a small scale. Risk: Impatience, because it appears slower.

The plant manager listens and then says what he has to say: "Option 1 would be cost-neutral and fast."

I nod. "Yes. And she's also the one that's most likely to lose trust if we drive her too hard."

"But we need speed," he says.

"And we need people who will stay," I say.

The room becomes silent. Not hostile. Just genuine.

"I don't want us to decide against the team," I continued. "And I also don't want us to remain unchanged for fear of resistance. We have to maintain both."

HR looks at me. "How would you handle it?"

I can feel my mind briefly searching for a quick answer. Tolerance for ambiguity means: not jumping into the first rescue attempt.

"I would recommend option 3," I finally say. "A small-scale pilot project. With clear criteria. And with the promise that we will decide together how to proceed after eight weeks."

The plant manager frowned. "This will take time."

"Yes," I say. "But it also creates real data and trust. If we quickly roll out something now that feels like control, we'll pay for it later with employee turnover. That's the more expensive option."

He leans back, appearing dissatisfied but listening. HR nods slowly.

"And what do we tell the team?" asks HR.

"The truth," I say. "That we have to solve a problem, that we can't fulfill everything at once, and that's why we want to learn before making sweeping decisions."

The plant manager sighed. "This won't make some people happy."

"That's true," I say. "But they're more likely to go along if they realize we're not hiding the excitement."

The next day, I'm standing in front of the team. Break room, 6:20 a.m., early shift. Some are tired, some still awake, all alert. "Modernizing shift models" sounds to them like "even more flexibility at our expense." I know that.

"Let me tell you what this is about," I begin. "Management wants to modernize, but not lose anyone and keep costs stable. These are three goals that can contradict each other."

A few foreheads were raised. It's rare to hear someone say that so openly.

"And that's precisely why we're not rushing into anything. We're launching a pilot project with two teams. Eight weeks. You'll have choices within clear rules. Together, we'll look at what works, what causes problems, and what helps you. Then we'll decide together what to roll out."

Sven raises his hand. "And what if it doesn't work?"

"Then we stop it," I say. "And go back to the table. The pilot is not a trick. It is a learning space."

Miriam asks: "Who decides after the eight weeks?"

"We," I say. "With clear criteria: workload, predictability, quality, costs. I promise you: If a variant only looks good in PowerPoint but not in everyday life, then it won't last."

The break room is silent. Then Tobias says quietly: "It's good that you say it's contradictory. We feel that anyway."

I nod. "Exactly. And if we feel it anyway, we can honestly work with it."

The next few weeks won't be easy. The pilot project will raise questions, encounter resistance, and push us to our limits. But it will also generate ideas. And most importantly, it will bring back the feeling that we don't make decisions about people, but with them.

At the end of the eight weeks, we're back in the meeting room. I have data. HR has feedback. The plant manager has costs. And we have a path forward that isn't perfect, but is viable.

Ambiguity remains. But we have become capable of acting within it.

# Takeaway inspiration

## Dealing with ambiguity

Tolerance for ambiguity means enduring contradictions without prematurely smoothing them over – and still making decisions. It shows itself when you honestly work with the "both-and" approach, instead of pretending there are easy answers.

If you encounter a seemingly contradictory task, first openly acknowledge the tensions ("We want X and Y, and both are pulling in different directions"). Only then should you look for ways to learn in small steps, instead of seeking quick, illusory certainties.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT DEALING WITH AMBIGUITY FOR YOU

1. Where am I pretending something is clear-cut when it isn't?
2. What kind of tension am I avoiding because I'm afraid of dissatisfaction?
3. What pilot or learning loop could help me become capable of acting in ambiguity?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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