

Solving Managerial Gordian Knots

Personal and professional leadership development

CoCreation

Claus Springborg, PhD



Most mid- or senior-level managers encounter Gordian Knots. Gordian Knots are problems with a significant, negative impact on the organisations' bottom line, which persist in spite of the managers best efforts to solve them. You may already know what your Gordian Knot is.

A sign that you are faced with a Gordian Knot is that you feel a particular problem is unnecessary and that it wouldn't be a problem if everyone just did what they are supposed to do. You may believe the reason for the problem is that your fellow managers or employees are uncooperative, lack initiative, lack positivity or lack the ability to learn. Another sign that you are faced with a Gordian Knot is that you see an unsolvable dilemma where two essential objectives seem mutually exclusive or where pursuing a crucial objective seems inevitable to bring something harmful with it.

Gordian Knots are not unsolvable. They only appear to be so. What typically blinds managers to the solution is their ideas about general leadership concerns, such as, confidence, commitment, collaboration, work-morale, motivation, freedom, strength, courage, appreciation, power, inspiration, and human nature.

In this course, we draw on new cognitive science, spiritual traditions, and modern psychology to detect and change the ideas that obstruct managers from enacting effective leadership in their Gordian Knot situations.

Methods

The course is an energizing mix of practical reflective exercises, short presentations of relevant research, and group dialogue. To ensure relevance, the course focuses on working with the participants' own challenges.

Learning objectives

- Develop the ability to assess when a problem is a Gordian Knots
- Learn to solve Gordian Knots by becoming aware of, evaluating, and changing general assumptions about leadership concerns
- Improve your ability to embody and enact leadership qualities, such as confidence, commitment, power, courage, inspiration, and appreciation.

Claus Springborg, PhD and lecturer at CBS

10+ years of experience teaching leadership and co-creation skills, management theory, systems of personal development, and entrepreneurship as an executive educator and as a lecturer at business schools across Europe. Being active as publishing academic, entrepreneur and social entrepreneur, I'm passionate about developing theories through practice and for practice. In my teaching, I value humanistic principles, precision, reflexivity, and humour.



Testimonials

"It's amazing to see how quickly and powerfully these techniques can work. And the embodied perspective brought considerably more energy to the decision-making process. Great stuff!"

Daved Barry, Professor at Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen

"Claus is a true communicative talent. In essence, he is able to talk passion into his sessions and his creative teaching approach and strong communication skills spills over into his business-oriented workshops",

Tom Elberling, Strategist, Marketing & B2B Sales Manager, Copenhagen

"I am constantly amazed at the power of Claus' interventions. Claus somehow simplifies the process of transformational change. He takes the drama and fear out of everyday issues and blocks. He works with such grace and focus"

Craig Douglas, Chairman of the Board at Tribalogic Ltd., Edinburgh

"Working one-to one with Claus is truly transformational – he brings exceptional skill, insight and sensitivity in working with life long, unresolved, and persistent issues. It is and has been a life-changing gift and wonderful adventure. Be open and expect change!"

Sue Belcher, management consultant, London

"Claus offers a deep and comprehensive package that I can weave into my busy work and family life. In particular, the razor-sharp way 'fuzzy' spiritual subjects are presented and discussed is so helpful"

Andy Hockaday, Ethical Investment Adviser, London

Cases

Case one: Improving collaboration as coordinating movement or creating physical connections

One manager, Anna, had for many years been unhappy about what she saw as lack of commitment to the decisions made in the management team. The managers would meet and make strategic decisions and then return to their respective departments and do something different from what they had agreed upon. Due to this lack of coordination, the organization as a whole did not perform well.

Anna operated from the assumption that the issue was analogue to making separate physical objects move towards the same destination. From this perspective one may use rational argumentation, monetary or social rewards or punishments, appeals to collaborative ideals, etc. to try to make the managers commit to the strategic decisions made in the team. Anna had done this for years, and nothing had worked satisfactorily.

Using various inquiry methods, I helped Anna formulate an alternative way of seeing the issue. Instead of seeing it as a matter of making separate physical objects move towards the same destination, she began seeing it as a matter of creating more physical connections. When Anna first saw the issue from this perspective, she immediately exclaimed: "The problem isn't lack of commitment. The problem is that we have no relationship to each other. I know this. When I get a new team of employees, the first thing I do is always to make them form relationships because without relationships nothing will work". Anna already had tools to create relationships. She had just never thought about applying these tools in relation to the management team. When she began to do this, the problem she had been struggling with for years finally began to be solved.

When Anna changed her perspective at the sensory level of her cognition, the situation changed from an unsolvable problem into a task Anna already knew how to deal with.

Case two: Changing a culture of dissatisfaction as Sisyphus work or riding a bicycle with the brakes on

Becky was COO of a company where the customer service employees were perpetually dissatisfied and complaining. They felt the rest of the organization did not appreciate their hard work. The atmosphere in the customer service department spilled over into how the employees spoke to the customers. Becky saw this as a severe problem for the organization.

Becky operated from the assumption that the low morale in the department was like a heavy boulder that she needed to roll up a mountain. Over the years, she had tried many things, including organizing events where employees from other departments would visit customer service to gain an in-depth understanding of how the challenges customer service solved for the organization. Whereas such initiatives did raise the morale in the department for a few days, the old culture of dissatisfaction would always return. Becky had come to see the work with changing the culture of dissatisfaction as a Sisyphus work. No matter how many times she rolled the boulder up the hill, it always rolled back down as soon as she was out the door.

Using various inquiry methods, I helped Becky formulate an alternative way of seeing the issue. Instead of seeing it as Sisyphus work, she looked at it as analogue to riding a bicycle with the breaks on. This may seem like a small change, but it made her ask radically different questions. Instead of asking how she could raise the morale, she asked: What creates the friction? In answering this question, she discovered that the manager of the customer service department would demand that all decisions should be approved by him – even decisions the employees were fully competent to make on their own. Becky was very relieved at this insight, for as she said: "I don't know how to make ten people understand and feel that they are appreciated. But I do know how to tell one manager, that he has to change his management style".

When Becky changed her perspective at the sensory level of her cognition, the situation changed from an unsolvable problem into an easy task Becky could solve in one single meeting.

Relevant publications:

Springborg, C. (forthcoming) Sensory Templates and Presencing, in Gunnlaugson, O. (ed) *Presencing Theory U: Individual Perspectives on Presencing*

Springborg, C. (2018) *Sensory Templates and Manager Cognition: Art, Cognitive Science and Spiritual Practices in Management Education*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Springborg, C. and Ladkin, D. (2017) 'Realising the potential of art-based interventions in managerial learning: Embodied cognition as an explanatory theory', *Journal of Business Research* 85, pp. 532-539.

Springborg, C. and Sutherland, I. (2014) 'Flying Blind? Teaching aesthetic agency in an executive MBA course', in Taylor, S. S. and Ladkin, D. (eds) *The Physicality of Leadership: Gesture, Entanglement, Taboo, Possibilities*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Books

Springborg, C. (2010) 'Leadership as art - leaders coming to their senses', *Leadership*, 6(3), pp. 243-258