

Leadership Development in Central/Eastern Europe: Part II

The Impact of Polish Culture on Leadership and Change

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In the last issue, John explored what happened in Central/Eastern Europe (CEE) after World War II and the impact 45 years under communism has had on the spirit of people. In this issue, he goes deeper into what he and his colleagues have learned about the impact Polish history and culture have on leadership and change. – The Editor

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The challenge in writing this issue has been to find the right way to describe how Polish leaders have to pull themselves—and their people—out of the subtle ‘undertow’ of the last two generations of history in order to unleash the extraordinary gifts they and their people possess.

In the West, things like individual initiative, innovation, risk-taking, teamwork, and quick, decisive leadership are sought-after qualifications for life and work. In Poland and Central/Eastern Europe (CEE), for many people in the workplace, leaders included, these are things to be entered into with caution. As our Polish clients tell us, *‘In the old days (code for ‘under Communism’), showing individual initiative had many potential downsides. Being “different” could be costly. You could even be arrested by the Militia for wearing colored socks! Having these fear-based memories embedded in our DNA leads even bright and committed people to pull their heads back inside and let things just happen.’*



Colored socks in 1960: against Party rules. . .

One challenge for many of our Polish leader/clients is: *‘How can we integrate the lessons from the past and yet free ourselves from that history for a different future that is ‘right’ for these times?’* In pursuit of that possibility, leaders face several paradoxes,

leftovers from their country's past four decades. Which ones are active in YOUR organization:

Paradox #1: We are Courageous, Yet Hesitant to Act

Polish history is full of people who defied the odds, took stands, and risked everything, often in the face of overwhelming odds, for their country or king. Three examples:

- 1287, the little city of Krakow held off the swarming Mongols on behalf of a collapsing Europe.
- 1683, at the Battle of Vienna, the Polish army stopped the surging Ottoman Empire from flowing North into the central European plains.
- 1939, a Polish (horse) calvary unit rode against the invading Nazi 'Blitzkrieg', facing machine guns and armored personal carriers with their lances and swords.



Polish calvary in a (re-enacted) 'suicidal' 1939 charge

Courage is not a rare commodity in Poland. And yet we see people standing at a street corner, at midnight, no cars coming in either direction, waiting for the light to change. Authority rules. The challenging paradox at work: people waiting to be told what to do by their boss.

Paradox #2: We are Bright, Yet Reluctant to Appear 'Special'

This past week, my colleague and I were working with a gifted 28-year-old IT guy who was being called on by his company to make an important presentation to an audience of 150 people at a technical university auditorium. As he explained, *'I spend eight hours in front of a computer and have never spoken to more than a handful of my friends until now. I'm a little nervous. . .'* As we listened to him practice his presentation, helped him relax, breathe, 'get in the flow', and stand in his power, he got stronger and more 'real', more confident, making contact with the little audience he had created for himself. We could tell he was 'getting it'—and so were we.

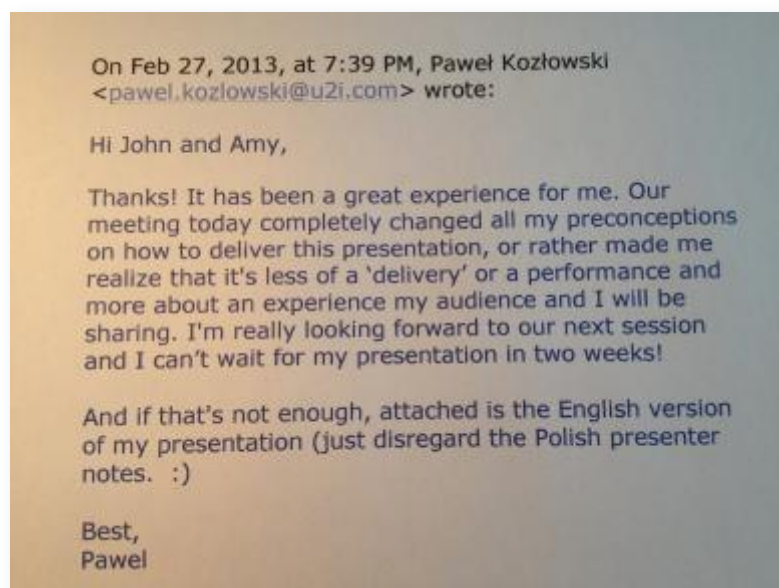
Then, about half-way through the session, he suddenly stopped and exclaimed, 'I've been doing it in English! I need to try it in Polish.'

'Of course', we said, 'that's the language you'll be using next week in the presentation.'

'No, that's not what I am saying. I'm saying that it's easier in English. In English I move around, make gestures more naturally, speak with more excitement and power. It's strange, but in Polish I find myself automatically speaking less powerfully, more carefully, with less excitement and more distance between me and my audience—and even between me and myself. **I feel like I'm another kind of person when I do it in Polish.**'

We were struck by his insight into the power language was having over his ability to be himself. 'OK', we said, 'keep going in Polish and let's see if you can reconnect with that other guy inside who was there when you were doing it in English.'

He did—very successfully, and in an email to us after our session, he observed:



If we are in a workshop here in Poland and want to interact with the group, we have learned to ask someone directly: 'Marek, how about you? Any thoughts?' And the person *always* has something worthwhile to say. They just don't raise their hand without an invitation, because back in school, unlike in my American schools, this could have been interpreted by teachers and fellow students as 'pushing yourself' or 'showing off', both not appreciated 'in the old days'.

Imagine an important meeting at work where people are being asked by their boss to tackle a tough problem. Everyone in the room probably has something to contribute, but the leader may have to drag it out of them. The leader's task: lower the 'stage' and show people that 'speaking out' is not only OK but essential for success of the effort—and the company.

This affects decision-making, too. When a high-risk decision has to be made, the thought comes, *'Hmmm. . . Think I'll just hunker down and let someone else take the decision. Whoever sticks their neck out on this runs the risk of being responsible when it fails.'* Not everyone navigates off this thought, but for many middle-age managers and employees, it will come unbidden, flitting across their mind, requiring a small act of courage to move beyond.

But even under communism there were rebellious individuals who found a way to work around—or underneath—the government-controlled environment. For instance, even non-practicing Catholics (there were a few) went to Mass every Sunday as an act of political defiance. *'You want to arrest us for going to church?! OK, then, arrest us all!'* This attitude of *'You will not control our spirit!'* ultimately led in 1989 to a nation-wide transformation that broke the back of Party rule—and triggered the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

Tapping into that spirit is what leaders need to do, and one reason we believe our work is so well received here is that a) we come in from 'outside' (literally) and are 'clean' of all that history, and b) we know how to help groups of people see possibility and make it happen.

Paradox #3: Trusting, Yet Suspicious



When I came to Krakow in 2008 and went running in the morning, I used to smile and say 'Dzień dobry' (Hello) to runners coming the other way. Invariably, they moved aside and looked at me as I went by like some kind of predator. And early on I was coached not to smile or get too enthusiastic in first-time conversations with potential clients. Why? I found out they tend to mistrust someone who appears to be that happy without any apparent reason. Still today, whenever I give an executive coaching client some positive feedback sometimes they get suspicious: *'What are you trying to sell me? What's the catch?'* People expect to be told how they are failing and what to do about it, not what they are doing well. 'Attaboys/attagirls' are hard to come by.

But, much to our relief, leaders who begin to make a practice of 'catching people doing something right' (as my old friend, Ken Blanchard, teaches) find that, once their

people see that it is real, they respond with increased enthusiasm, risk-taking and energy. 'In the old days' people *did* trust. It was just a small circle of close friends and family. Now, like people everywhere, workers want to trust their leaders. And like everywhere in the world, leaders just need to earn it—by being trustworthy consistently over time.

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--Virginia Robinson, Change Consultant, Toronto, Canada



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