



There Is No Second Chance For A First Impression! Why Jumping Into Cold Water Is Not Necessarily Heroic

By Christian Rook

„Something’s not right here!“

There are situations where you sense it from the very first moment: something’s not right here. Something is going off the rails before it has even properly begun. And yet, sometimes you still say yes to a mandate.

Because the assignment sounds exciting. Because the project seems appealing. That was exactly the case I want to share here.

"You have to start Monday morning!"

A short-term assignment: Thursday the first call, Friday a brief interview. The start was set for Monday.

I knew it was too rushed. I knew I wouldn’t even see the CEO on my first day; he was scheduled to be on a business trip that couldn’t be postponed. I pointed out that we should delay my start if he wasn’t going to be on-site — too much was still unclear.

But he insisted that two consulting firms were already on-site conducting an analysis and that there was no alternative: I had to start on Monday.

There had been a short getting-to-know-you interview on Friday — but that had taken place before the contract was even signed, and, as we know, in such meetings you don’t really get into the "meat" of things.

"You have to start Monday morning. I'll have everything prepared for you: agenda, laptop, office, phone. Please come!"

There Is No Second Chance For A First Impression



My mistake: I agreed.

The first day

Monday morning, 7:30 am, I parked in the visitors' lot, checked in at the reception desk — and was met with puzzled looks.

No one knew I was coming. No office, no agenda, no preparation. Instead, I was led to a glass-walled meeting room in the lobby. By way of consolation: a cup of coffee and a profound sense of disorientation.

And this, despite the fact that one of my professional strengths is giving orientation to others.

It took a while before anyone even considered themselves responsible for me — a young HR trainee, who sincerely apologized with visible desperation.

That's just how things usually are around here," she said shyly, awkwardly laughing off the embarrassment.

In companies accustomed to chaos, disorganization quickly becomes normal. But for an outsider, it's a shock.

The Operations Team

The decisive realization, however, came a little later when I stood before sixteen managers who looked at me just as questioningly as I looked at them.

No one knew who I was, why I was there, what my assignment was, or what we were supposed to discuss today.

Even worse: the confusion turned into open bewilderment when it became clear that I was mandated as Technical Director and Interim Plant Manager for this site and a second one — and that the current position holder, who had neither resigned nor been officially replaced and had only been informed by a vague phone call late Friday evening, was actually still present in the building at that very moment — but had not been invited to this meeting.

There was no agenda. No expectations had been communicated.

Only an empty room and a vague hope that somehow something would come together. It was at that moment I fully realized: It had been a mistake to even start before the proper groundwork was laid.

I hadn't insisted early enough on taking control and leading from the start.

We – the problem solvers

Because, contrary to what many might think: the client is not there to provide perfect conditions for us.

He can't. The client brings a package. A problem.

Perhaps the supervisory board is breathing down his neck, demanding he finally deliver black numbers again.

Perhaps he himself senses that the company is teetering on the brink.

But very often, management, after years of fighting, is at a loss — no longer knowing exactly what's wrong, or what more they can do.

That's why they bring in external help. That's why we are called in.

Here's the diagnosis!

It's just like visiting a doctor.

The patient comes in because he's in pain, because he senses something is wrong, but he can't exactly pinpoint it.

He expects the doctor to diagnose, to show the way, to take charge.

And sometimes, when the doctor delivers the diagnosis and recommends immediate surgery, the patient says: *"That's not going to work for me right now. I have an important business trip next week. Or my grandson's first day of school."*

What does a good doctor do in that situation? He doesn't just nod along understandingly. He remains calm, clear, and unwavering. He explains the urgency. He explains the risks of delaying treatment. And he gives the patient a clear, informed choice. He stays firmly in his professional responsibility. *"That's understandable. But if you don't undergo surgery immediately, your chances look very poor."*

It's exactly the same for us. When we are called in as interims, as consultants, as change managers, it's not because everything is ready. It's precisely because it's not ready. Because there's chaos. Because there's confusion. Because there are resistances — both conscious and unconscious.

And sometimes — and this is important to understand — the client himself may be part of the problem.

Perhaps he's been sweeping issues under the rug for years that are now impossible to ignore. Perhaps he made decisions that drove the company into trouble.

Perhaps he truly desires change — but sabotages himself, out of fear of losing control, out of fear of what might come to light, out of habit, or wounded pride.

And let's not forget: the client has a completely different perspective.

He knows the company better than anyone. He doesn't have to make a good first impression on Monday morning.

He doesn't have to explain himself. But precisely because of that, it falls to us to create clarity.

We are the doctor. We are the professional helper. The one who is not part of the system and can therefore call things by their true names. The one who sees structures others can no longer perceive. And the one who must take responsibility for creating the framework where real change becomes possible.

If we fail to take on that responsibility, we miss the most critical moment: the start. The moment when trust can be built, when direction can be set, when momentum can be generated.

If that moment is lost, we will spend the next weeks and months fighting invisible resistance, mistrust, and a gradual erosion of energy.

We will lose the very strength we would need to drive the real solutions.

If there is no clarity on Day One, it will not magically emerge by Day Sixty.

When I think back today to that Monday morning, to the glass meeting room, to the puzzled faces, I don't just see a company that wasn't prepared.

I see myself — realizing that I should have taken leadership much earlier. Before the start. Back on Friday. Before the very first step.

Jumping into cold water is not heroic!

Cold water is not some glorious test of strength we should be proud of.

It's a clear sign that we haven't taken our role seriously enough.

Our role to not hope for good conditions, but to create them ourselves.

Our role to not wait for clear expectations, but to set them ourselves.

Our role to not trust that things will somehow sort themselves out, but to ensure they do.

The client doesn't need to be prepared. He only needs to be willing to accept help.

Everything else — the diagnosis, the treatment plan, the leadership — rests with us.

And the clearer we are in accepting this role, the better the outcome will be. For us. For the client. And for the company we are tasked with helping.

P.S. Incidentally, this project ultimately developed very successfully.

The behavior of the CEO, however, unfortunately didn't change — not that it was expected to. Eventually, under pressure from the shareholders, he was encouraged to step down.



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