



# THE WAKE-UP CALL



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## „Let's Go For A Ride, Myer – I've got to show you something.“

The power of intelligent communication in times of transformation

By Christian Rook

### Part 1: Myer, Kramer and the Drive into the Mountains (A modern business fable)

Doug Myer, plant manager at CNC Inc, hadn't slept much in recent weeks. Since the major restructuring began, a strange silence had settled over the plant – not the calming kind, but the kind that smells like farewell.

First the cafeteria. Then the temp workers. Now it was hitting the specialist departments. Consultants kept talking about "efficiency," as if that were a suitable remedy for years of negligence. A word like a band-aid on an amputated leg.

Doug Myer did what you do when you want to avoid move higher up on a certain list. He arrived earlier, stayed later, wrote reports no one asked for. Collected tasks like others collect loyalty points. At

home, he stayed quiet. His wife had enough on her plate. The apartment had long since become too small since Jonas, the youngest family member, had arrived. They should have moved. But right now, "should" had become the new "impossible." Two kids, one income – enough for dreams, not for square meters. When his wife asked why he looked so tired, he smiled dutifully and promised a weekend outing. A promise on standby, week after week.

Things had not always been so grim. Before the current crisis – and this time it wasn't some personal one, but the kind with global licensing: the industry was moving from internal combustion engines to electric cars - he had believed he could rise in the company. Make more money. He was part of the inner circle. Had been with this company for his entire adult life.

And, there was precedent for his belief. Peter Kramer, owner and CEO, had not long ago gifted ten percent of the company shares to Michael Miller, his Doug's old friend and the company's Head of R&D, for an invention.

Five million Euros in value. Back then. Today? Probably one zero more.



If that happened to Michael, why not for him also. Myer had dedicated so much of his life to the company. And Kramer had never criticized him. That had to be a sign, right? Only this crisis made no effort to follow his plans.

On a Wednesday evening, Kramer, surprisingly, knocked on Myer's office door.  
"Doug – do you have a moment? I want to show you something. Come with me?"

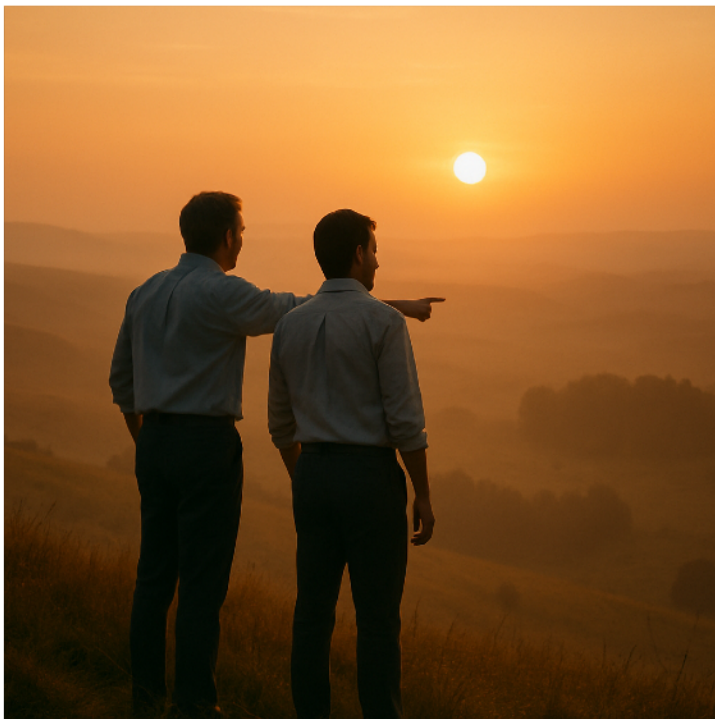
A brief flicker. Was this the long-awaited conversation? Maybe a change in the structure? The Technical Director was retiring in six months. The boss had recently mentioned something about "internal solutions" and "continuity" – vague enough to imagine anything. Maybe Myer would somehow be more involved. No official title, perhaps, but influence? More responsibility? His heart reacted as if it knew more than he did.

He took a deep breath, wiped his damp palms on his pants – and said yes.

They set off. Destination unknown. "Surprise," said Kramer, smiling like he'd just gotten a new bike. The road led toward the hills. Kramer hummed. Always the same melody, never the chorus. Myer stayed silent. In his head, scenarios played on loop: partnership, shares, letterhead with his name.

After half an hour, the car turned off onto a gravel road and stopped in a meadow.  
"Come," said Kramer. "It's not far."

They got out. Myer smelled grass, earth, a hint of spring – and thought of the reports on his desk. The unanswered message from his wife. At the top of the hill, they stopped.



Before them lay a large piece of land. Untouched, picturesque. Rolling fields, a small grove, a spring glistening in the light like a commercial. Way back on the horizon: a spot like something from a corporate image film. A new site? And he as co-owner?

Kramer stood next to him, placed an arm around his shoulder and traced the horizon with his finger.

"How do you like it here, Doug?"

"Great location," said the plant manager. Short. Controlled.

"Yes, you could really enjoy life here," replied the boss.

"The land just came on the market," he continued. "Brand new. No one knows yet. We could jump on it if we wanted to," said Kramer, excited like a realtor.

"Imagine, Doug, the house would go right over there. Big. Enough room for everyone. White stone, glass front, lots of wood. Marvelous. Outside enough space for a pool. And three garages –

just to be safe.“

He laughed softly, a little embarrassed, almost as if he sensed things were getting off track.

"My brother says it's all a bit much. But I think you should show it when you've made it. Don't you think, Doug?"

Doug Myer nodded. Inside him, something stirred. Was this... his moment? The boss had said, 'We could jump on it if we wanted to.' He meant him, surely.

Kramer pointed to a flat strip on the north side.

"You've got kids, right, Doug? Down there would be space for a great playground. Private, of course. Climbing area, trampoline."

He grinned contentedly. Myer thought: Now. Now it's coming. Then Kramer fell silent. Only the wind moved the grass.

"Do you know why I'm showing you this, Doug?"

"You're about to tell me," Myer replied. Calm. Expectant.

Kramer again laid a hand on his shoulder. This time, he pressed down.

"These are tough times. Really rough times, actually ... You're doing great work. ... I see that. ... We all see that. ... And I won't forget it. ... You mean a lot to me .... My entire family ... I wanted you to be the first to see this ... and ... I just wanted to say thank you. Really. Keep it up."

Myer forced a smile. Still said nothing. Surely, there was more.

Kramer nodded, like someone who had just made a toast. Then he slowly turned and walked back to the car. While walking, he added casually:

„You are really valuable to me! Because if you keep working as hard as you have, I might be able to afford all of this here in a few months."

## Part 2: The Analysis

This story is told in a number of ways in a various management seminars and trainings. Let's unpack it: The story of Doug Myer and his boss Peter Kramer vividly illustrates how well-intentioned leadership efforts can fundamentally miss their mark. At first glance, Kramer seems like a leader who sees and values his key people. But this is precisely where the misunderstanding lies: Kramer does not recognize Myer in *his* reality. Instead, he projects his own concept of success onto him. What is meant as appreciation becomes, from the employee's perspective, a demotivating misfire.



Myer is caught in a classic double bind. He is under enormous pressure – financially, emotionally, professionally. He fears for his position, senses the growing insecurity after the restructuring, and experiences the slow erosion of safety and structure. At the same time, he clings to the hope that his commitment will be seen and rewarded. He interprets signs – like the case of colleague Miller, who received 10% of the company for an invention – as proof that opportunity is possible.

For Myer, this event becomes a projection screen: he, too, loyal, hardworking, and unobtrusive, might be next. This hope doesn't stem from concrete signals but from a mix of wishful thinking, selective perception, and a lack of communication.

When Kramer invites him to come along that evening, Myer hopes for a symbolic promotion. He expects a development talk, maybe even a concrete offer. But what follows is no conversation about shared goals or personal perspectives. Kramer shows him a plot of land – his *own* future paradise, with pool, garages, and private playground. He describes it with glowing eyes as if sharing a dream. But what he doesn't see: it's his dream, not Myer's. Not a single word about Myer's situation. No offer. No perspective. Just a thank you – followed by the sentence: "Because if you keep pulling like this, I might already be able to afford all of this next year."

This is where the tragedy lies: Kramer believes he is motivating Myer. In reality, he confronts him with the gap between their two worlds. While Kramer talks about pool size and exclusivity, Myer thinks about his cramped apartment, financial worries, and exhausted wife. The vision Kramer shares has nothing to do with Myer's reality – in fact, it only highlights it more starkly.

Psychologically, this is a classic case of projection and failure of perspective-taking. Kramer assumes that his own motivations – status, ownership, aesthetic satisfaction – are universal. What drives him must surely drive others. But motivation is deeply individual. What inspires one person may frustrate another. For Myer, the vision of Kramer's luxury estate means nothing. He is driven by a need for safety, development, and true participation.

From a behavioral economics standpoint, this effect is reinforced by the so-called "framing effect." Kramer presents the situation as a gesture of appreciation, an emotional invitation. But Myer interprets it entirely differently. For him, it becomes clear that his hard work serves only to fund someone else's dream – without any stake of his own. This violates our deeply rooted sense of fairness. People are willing to strive when they feel the system is just. But when it appears unfair, motivation drops sharply, regardless of the rewards offered.

The lesson from this episode is sobering but urgently needed: leadership doesn't mean projecting dreams onto others – it means meeting people within their own realities. It's not enough to say "thank you" when that thanks doesn't relate to the lived experience of the other person. Visions must be relatable. They must be framed in a way that allows the other person to see themselves within them – not just as a supporter, but as a co-creator, a beneficiary, a stakeholder.

Kramer meant well – and got it all wrong. He sought closeness and created distance. He wanted to motivate and ended up discouraging. The story of Myer is not just an individual disappointment. It is a structural parable: about the necessity of true perspective-taking, the dangers of symbolic leadership, and the gap between good intentions and actual impact.



### Part 3: Empty Phrases and False Images – How Leadership Undermines Itself

What unfolds between Kramer and Myer is not an isolated case. It mirrors a pattern seen in almost every major transformation: the use of management language that is meant to inspire but ends up alienating. These are the slogans and phrases managers use to motivate their teams:

*"We're all in the same boat," "Growth is our goal," "Change is an opportunity," or "Every crisis brings new possibilities."*

On paper, these statements sound positive. In reality, they often do the opposite of what they intend. Because they miss the lived reality of those they are directed at. Employees who are losing colleagues, seeing their departments restructured, working overtime with no idea how much longer they'll have a job – for them, such phrases don't feel encouraging. They feel cynical.



Take the image of the "boat". It ignores that some are bailing out water in the hull while others are enjoying cocktails on the upper deck. One employee once told me the metaphor was especially cruel because it failed to mention that those on the shop floor are rowing in the dark, not knowing where they are or where they're going. All they hear are the whips cracking and the orders to "Row faster!"

Source: „Ben Hur“ - picture-alliance / dpa | dpa MGM

“Growth” may look attractive in a PowerPoint chart – and it may even be vital for survival. But for the individual, it often means: more work, more pressure, less security. And "change as an opportunity" may be true – but not when it's imposed from above, poorly explained, and accompanied by fear. In all these cases, what becomes visible is an emotional disconnect between the language of leadership and the reality of the workforce.

This disconnect doesn't arise out of malice, but from a lack of perspective-taking. Managers often communicate from their own lens – rational, strategic, visionary. But employees operate on completely different coordinates: existential, emotional, immediate. When a manager invokes "shared growth" in the midst of layoffs, they are not seen as a leader. They are seen as someone who has lost touch with what really matters.

One core idea from storytelling, as Annette Simmons describes in *The Story Factor*, pinpoints the problem: **Every leadership message triggers the unspoken question: “What’s in it for you?”** When employees sense that the leader telling the story is primarily pushing their own agenda – without being open about it – mistrust grows. Just like in Myer's case: he intuitively understands that his efforts are funding someone else's dream, without any benefit to himself. What was meant to be a vision becomes a revelation of a one-sided gain. And that is precisely what demotivates.

The fundamental error is this: leadership too often orients itself by its intended message, rather than its actual effect. You want to encourage – but you cause discouragement. You want to show perspective – but you create distance. You want to inspire – but instead you alienate.

The solution? Move away from slogans. Move toward concrete, human, experience-based communication. To truly motivate, you must connect – not generalize. To build trust, you must listen – not reassure. And if you want people to move with you, you must be willing to step into *their* reality first.

Only then can true connection emerge. Anything else remains – like the hillside property – a beautiful dream that excludes more than it includes.

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