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# *'Doing yellow'*

A few pages to clear your mind.



## **DOING YELLOW ACTIVITIES AND CREATING AWARENESS**

Learning to observe and see the gap

## Introduction **The ability to observe**

In order to be able to do 'green', 'red' and 'blue' activities, leaders and their co-workers need connection and commitment. We have to feel connected to our goals, so that we know why we are doing what we are doing and can work with motivation. We have to feel a link with the people we work with so that we know what is expected of us and what we can expect of others. We have to be in tune with ourselves, our talents and weaknesses, in order to be able to create value for ourselves and others.

Viewing reality as it is and accepting it is the only right starting point here. But what is reality? Your reality differs from that of your colleagues. Everyone thinks about the world with a different mind, feels it with a different skin and sees it through different eyes. "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are<sup>1</sup>." The way we see things is filtered by who we are, by our past, our personality, convictions and preconceptions. So no one sees things in their 'real', 'pure' state, or objectively.

To achieve a goal together with others, we need to create a joint base by finding a cross-section of these differing worlds of experience. That requires 'the ability to observe': we have to be able to look at ourselves, others and things by zooming out. Distance brings insight. Doing 'green', 'red' and 'blue' activities does not mean thundering past like an express train. From time to time, it is necessary to step back in order to check whether everything is still going in the right direction. Sometimes you have to allow space and emptiness to find out what you need to know.

<sup>1</sup>Quote from Anaïs Nin.

## Mind your business

If we don't want to chase blindly after our targets and stop feeling like victims of unwanted situations, we need to start paying attention and become mindful. If we want everything to click properly, activities and results, suppliers and customers, leaders and teams, problems and solutions, then we literally have to start minding our business, so that we can think and act with more awareness. That means having insight into the situation, because we are open to other perspectives. It also means with acceptance, so that we can see things without being immobilised by them.

Although doing 'yellow' as a business is often perceived as a last-in-line activity, it is in fact the activity that should precede everything else: before you continue what's working well and doing more of it (doing 'green'), quit what's not working well (cutting out 'red') or embark on a new business path (doing 'blue'), you should prepare yourself. Preferably you take a moment and think about it. So doing yellow activities should feature prominently in first place. And yet this activity is mostly covered last, because strategically it is – seemingly – the least obvious and profitable choice. Because doing 'yellow' activities, just like doing 'blue' activities involves some uncertainty - it has no clearly defined deliverable - and it takes time.

And time and therefore money is precisely the thing that no company ever has too much of. It is a resource that has to be used carefully. But however paradoxical it may sound, it is precisely this awkward relationship with time that makes us face facts.

By cutting corners while doing 'yellow', we get worse in doing the right things right, because we lose the overall picture and no longer see the links.

In the paragraphs below, we show that doing yellow activities is as essential for a company as the other three colours. But it has to be done in a balanced way.



# Doing yellow activities

In Western business cultures, a good many leaders are reluctant to anything that has a whiff of contemplation. Whenever possible, everything must be lean and mean: the earning models, the processes, the plans, the career paths; it has to be fast and 'profitable', in the short term at least. This is often at the expense of effectiveness and quality.

**Pay peanuts, and you  
get monkey business.**



Doing yellow activities runs counter to this. Yellow activities cover everything relating to reflecting, analysing, discussing, adjusting, acknowledging and recognising in order to establish sustainable, enduring impact. On the yellow path, you create a professional room of one's own<sup>2</sup>. You create a safe, free space to sort things out, adjust where necessary, consider new directions, start new dreams, outline new strategies, give talents a chance. As doing 'yellow' is a high-quality occupation that cannot be measured immediately - not in the short term, in any case - it is not easy to get a budget for it, even though it will be clearly felt in the results.

Just so there's no misunderstanding: although spending 'yellow' time preferably occurs spontaneously and organically, it means anything but brainstorming without any obligation or letting thoughts fan out goodness knows where. That way, there are soon no boundaries. In a business context, therefore, doing 'yellow' is de facto an institutionalised, scheduled activity, delimited in time. Yellow activities have a clearly defined purpose. Directly or indirectly, they serve the interests of doing 'green', 'red' or 'blue'.

<sup>2</sup> Referring to Virginia Woolf (1929), *A Room of One's Own*

## Gap-analysis

Doing 'yellow' is the prelude, an intellectual and intuitive stepping stone to every strategic action in a company. It ensures that everything is properly balanced, that the conditions are optimal when you push the start or stop button. As such, a 'yellow' moment provides super-powerful momentum, it's a decisive business moment.

Doing 'yellow' and creating awareness is all about creating clarity. It means that you want to clear the mist between what you want to achieve and where you actually are. Between dream and deed, goal and result, between your actual day's work and what you had in mind beforehand: there is always a gap. Awakening from your daily routine to become aware of the gap between what is and what could be, is vitally important to act purposefully.

These so-called achievement gaps are exposed and assessed by studying them carefully. To do that, you have to enhance your perspectives. As the French expression says: "Il faut reculer pour mieux sauter" - You have to step back to take a better jump. Only when we are able to look at things from a distance, we see the right proportions, enabling us to take the right decisions. And only when we see things as they are, can we name them accurately and act accordingly.

## Asking and seeking

Doing yellow activities means that you are ready to ask a lot of questions.

How far away from your goal are you?

What do you actually want to achieve?

Is that meaningful? For whom?

Are you on the right track? Why?

Why not? What could help you?

What is holding you back?

Critical questions deepen our understanding, foster our imagination and enable us to make the best possible use of the resources available to us when seeking solutions and achieving goals.

Whether you are active in the industrial sector or in the service economy, every initiative needs knowledge and information, resources and people. To find the right proportions, you have to extend your antennae, scan the terrain. Doing yellow activities always means entering into a dialogue. It is an invitation to talk, to share and gather knowledge: internally, with yourself – or externally, with your environment. The hardest thing about doing ‘yellow’ is consciously reaching out and showing yourself: to your inner you or to others, your boss, your colleagues, the technical people, your suppliers.

### Receiving and finding

The easy thing about doing ‘yellow’ is that it’s time and place independent. A bike trip, yoga session, lunch break or a mediated group session, they are all equally suited for it, as long as you are ready to open up and receive. Doing yellow activities means daring to doubt. It means realising that there is always something to learn, and that everything and everyone that you come across can offer added value, even if you have been at the helm of a company for 45 years.

Doing yellow activities also means that you are ready to take things on board. That you are receptive to the answers that you find, however difficult or uncomfortable they may be. You open doors and work with what comes in. Often, these discoveries only open more doors. Answers may pose other questions. Sometimes hard questions hide warm answers.

Sometimes friendly questions become hard and just ruffle even more feathers. That's fine. Perhaps you have just done the exercise asking yourself the sample questions listed above. Maybe answers came up easily. Or perhaps not and you are at a loss for words. That's okay too. Because acknowledging that you don't know something is also a valuable insight. It is the baseline, the reset point to start again and set a new course. A vision, or alignment regarding a vision very often only comes into being after the painful realisation that there is no vision for the company/ the business project you are in charge of/ your personal workload. Maybe no one, including you, really knows what course the ship is sailing. Perhaps you are rather adrift. That's also fine. At least for now, just a little while longer. Shortly, (after reading this) you will be able to get down to work.

## **Vulnerability**

As already stated, doing 'yellow' can be hard to sell, as it might mean building bridges to unknown territories with uncertain outcomes, at a cost, at a time, at an emotion, causing potential discomfort and inconvenience.



Yellow activities often conflict with our human psyche. Most people are not keen on exposing themselves and engaging in (self) reflection, let alone in the presence of others. Even when things are running smoothly, we prefer not to be confronted with questions, because we are afraid of being unmasked. All that poking around could disrupt the normal course of business, bring sensitive subjects to the surface, reveal our ignorance and uncertainty. Questions could degenerate into accusations and so on.

Exposing yourself to questions undeniably makes you vulnerable. As a leader especially, you always have a lot on the line. However, strong leaders assume their responsibility and do not immediately whip out an umbrella when confrontations occur. As best-selling author and vulnerability coach Brené Brown says: “Vulnerability is the birthplace of connection. If it doesn’t feel vulnerable, the sharing is probably not constructive.” Challenges and opportunities have to be examined as quickly as possible, solutions forged the same day - no one has time for an ego that stands in the way of this.

## With shaky courage and positive intelligence

Brené Brown also argues: “We all fail. But only acknowledging those failures isn’t enough. Real leadership can happen only when we embrace our imperfections and work to overcome them.”<sup>3</sup> But how do we do that, embrace imperfection? No one likes to see themselves as unaware. No one likes to be called a failure. Defensive as we are, we burst a blood vessel as soon as someone points out our shortcomings and needs of attention.

Acceptance is an essential intermediate step here. Depending on the set-up and situation, it can take months, weeks, a day or only half an hour to become aware and accept.

Sometimes we have to go back to nature, get a breath of fresh air, go home or spend time with our family and friends to shake off firmly entrenched convictions, to realise that there is another truth than the one we liked to believe so much.

We can appeal to people who can help us, enter into new collaborations, brush up our skills. Even if it is with knees knocking and shaky courage, we can at last move forward and stop marking time. Courage takes courage: the more we behave with courage, the easier it becomes. Not only that: the more we surround ourselves with people who back us up, who believe in us and bring out the positive in us, the more courageous we manage to be and the more we are able to infect others with our nerve and inspire them to be courageous, too.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aspan, Maria (2018).

How This Leadership Researcher Became the Secret Weapon for Oprah, Pixar, IBM, and Melinda Gates. Inc. Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.inc.com/magazine/201810/maria-aspan/brene-brown-leadership-consultant-research.html>

<sup>4</sup> Inspired by Griet Van Vaerenbergh (28/5/2022), Radio 1, De Wereld van Sofie.

## From unconsciously incompetent to unconsciously competent

By mapping out a path together towards a common goal, armed with questions and answers, you create involvement, passion, enthusiasm. You strengthen relationships between people, so that they can go further, together, in a way that feels logical and right to everyone.

There is a learning process  
beneath doing 'yellow'  
whereby we evolve from being  
'unconsciously incompetent'  
to being 'unconsciously  
competent'.



Every goal attainment process comprises four learning stages<sup>5</sup>. Everyone who strives to attain a goal first needs to find out what they do not yet know. The vision you are striving for, the knowledge you need, the resources, skills and abilities you require, whether there is sufficient motivation; by querying things like this, we become aware of the ignorance, inability, incapacity, unwillingness, worthlessness. All inhibiting factors that were unconsciously present come to light. As a consequence, from being unconsciously incompetent (1) we become consciously incompetent (2).

If we however train ourselves enough, reach out for help and gather the necessary abilities, we then become consciously competent (3): we know that we are on the right path, that we can do it, even though we sometimes waver. Finally, if we endure, practice a lot and keep repeating, we reach the stage of unconscious competence (4). The new way of working together becomes an ingrained habit that everyone adopts easily, without the need to think about it much more. It becomes part of the collective 'unconscious' in a team or company.

<sup>5</sup>See Maslow's learning curve (1954).

## Yes! Yes! Yes!

However, caution is needed. It is a leader's responsibility to firmly indicate where the boundaries of this awakening exercise lie: you will need to guard against over-eager freedom of expression, but also false respectability<sup>6</sup> and sheepish political correctness.

The pitfalls are twofold. On the one hand, a company where people are encouraged to think critically and speak freely can easily drift into becoming an opinions factory. The aim is of course not for everyone to express their opinion of everyone and everything just like that. A process intended to increase awareness by no means is a free ticket to turn a company into a hysterical talking shop. It neither can slide off into a platform to undermine someone's authority, or a refectory for whistle-blowers.

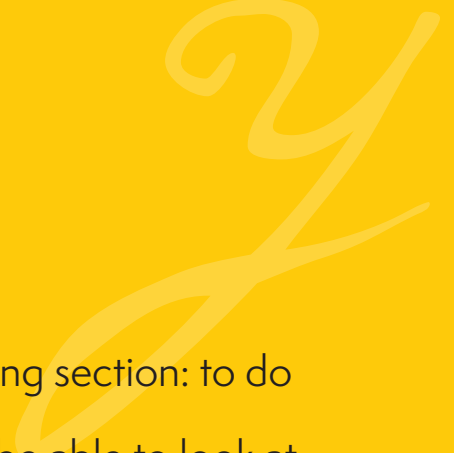
But doing 'yellow' may neither way prevent 'the right' people from rightly expressing criticism or putting a good idea on the table, however vulnerable and undeveloped it may be. Doing yellow activities may not become a 'bustling beast' that silences everyone and stifles all sense of initiative for fear of being laughed at or suffering reprisals, dismissal or legal battles.

<sup>6</sup>Inspired by Marc Didden




## ViCre-paradigm: The 9 Elements

<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>




To conclude and reconnect with the opening section: to do the right things the right way, you need to be able to look at your business as a good observer. Whether you are a leader or an employee, when you want to improve things, you have to be able to observe in a structured and holistic way. On top of that, if you want to change something, you have to be able to quickly visualise the possible effects of this change on a sort of cross-section on the full scale of your business.



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That makes The 9 Elements into a handy graphic memory aid if you want to get to the point promptly in any business discussion. Just draw a 9 Elements box and you have a simple mental guide to talk business without overlooking the essentials.



A large, abstract graphic composed of thick, flowing yellow lines that sweep across the left and top portions of the page. The lines are dynamic and organic, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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Published books by Eddy Helsen:  
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