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Training in the Dark

Seminars Help Business Executives Learn About Personal Deficits They May Never Have Recognized

By **DEBORAH STIENBORN**

Andreas Heinecke was sitting in the dark at Bertelsmann AG headquarters in Gütersloh a few years ago, sipping cocktails and making small talk, when the idea struck. High-ranking businessmen, like those mingling with him that balmy June evening, try everything to become better leaders—from personal coaching in their comfortable Connecticut homes to team-building in the rough Sri Lankan wilderness. Why not train them in the dark?

The German media conglomerate had invited Mr. Heinecke that evening to set up, literally, a dark bar. It was a fun conversational challenge for Bertelsmann's top managers after a long day of meetings. Pitch-black management training didn't seem far-fetched afterwards.

Especially so since Mr. Heinecke, a documentary journalist turned social entrepreneur, already had founded Dialogue in the Dark. The then-traveling exhibit aimed to increase public awareness of otherness. It took sighted visitors through various settings in absolute darkness, with the help of blind guides and walking sticks. They'd cross a busy city street, walk over a wobbly bridge, buy fresh produce at a market, pay with change at a café—all without seeing a thing.

That evening in Gütersloh, the 55-year-old started to think about tailoring that same experience to businesses' needs. After all, "hierarchy disappears in the dark, among all types of people," he says. "And that's really good for personal and professional development."

Today, seminars in the dark, usually held right at Dialogue in the Dark's exhibits, comprise an ever-larger part of the group's business. Incorporated as a for-profit "social franchise" in Hamburg since 2001, Dialogue in the Dark employs 6,000 blind people in more than 30 countries from China to Mexico. In the past four years alone, about 10,000 managers from [Standard Chartered PLC](#), [Daimler AG](#), Goldman Sachs Group Inc., [IBM Corp.](#) and more have undergone training in the dark or in silence, an offshoot of the seminar concept. Seminars held doubled to more than 500 last year.

What's the draw? "People who attend begin to think differently about ability and disability," says Mr. Heinecke, who became interested in blindness in the mid-1980s while working closely with a fellow journalist who had lost his eyesight. Participating in the seminars, business executives learn about personal deficits they may never have recognized. It can be the simplest of things: perhaps they've been ignoring subtle tones of frustration in employees in the haste to complete a meeting. Or they've unconsciously micromanaged. The idea is to turn these newly discovered deficits into assets for better leadership.

Top managers like taking to the dark to steer and motivate themselves and their employees. Early this year, Michael Kaschke, newly appointed CEO at optics manufacturer Carl Zeiss AG, wanted his management team to strategize for the coming years. After considering many alternatives, he chose to do so at least partially in the dark.

"I thought it would be an enlightening approach, especially for an optical company," Mr. Kaschke says. In late March, Zeiss's CEO and 14 senior managers spent a day at Dialogue in the Dark's headquarters in Hamburg's old shipping district. Meetings in broad daylight, in which Harvard Business School staff assisted with management theory and strategic planning, preceded an evening of team-building in the dark.

Participants had to solve a series of timed exercises in the pitch-black Hamburg exhibit. The clock ticking, they measured a long thick rope and tried to fold it into a perfect square. They pieced together a wooden rainbow puzzle of various shapes and sizes and got it almost right. They made their way through the exhibit, picked out fruits and vegetables at the market, and sat down together for a drink, all in utter darkness.

Enlightening it was. "I hadn't imagined such a fast change of mindset would be possible," says Mr. Kaschke. "Within a matter of moments after entering the dark, we all relied on each other, easily and effectively."

Perhaps due to the intensity of "working" in the dark, participants agree that lessons learned stick with them long afterwards—for better or worse.

"Weeks later, the day is still very present in my mind," says Thorsten Ruck, a regional head of corporate banking at German savings bank Hamburger Sparkasse, who joined a one-hour workshop at Dialogue in the Dark early this spring. Like Zeiss's executives, Mr. Ruck worked with other team members to fit together a puzzle, measure a rope, and set a table for coffee and cake. His team, though, worked in a "black box" seminar room just next door to the exhibit.

"That day, I learned to be more sensitive to individual members of a group, to think twice about whether I come across as sincere or half-hearted in meetings," recalls Mr. Ruck. "I still keep these things in mind every day of the week."

Not everyone manages well in the dark. "People who appear strong may quickly experience their weaknesses and vulnerabilities," founder Mr. Heinecke says. One participant at a seminar in China rushed back out of the blackened room shortly after arriving. "She just couldn't handle it," he recalls. "And this was someone who manages billions of dollars in risk capital in California. The experience gives leadership a whole new meaning."

Mr. Heinecke later convinced the fund manager to try again. It's not always so easy to turn a bad experience around. Dialogue in the Dark recently had "a very difficult workshop" in Dublin with staff of a major technology company: "Extremely chaotic, noisy, lack of concentration. We couldn't capture their attention." A similar situation a while ago occurred with another company in Singapore, he adds. "There was a lot of team, but no work."

On the flip side, some companies are developing their own unique programs with Dialogue in the Dark's help. A northern European software company late last year created a combat zone at the Hamburg exhibit to motivate developers amid competition for a new account.

"Balloons were popping to simulate the sound of gunfire, team members huddled and threw themselves on the ground to protect each other, and everyone came out of the event motivated," recalls Miro Milec, a blind guide who helped organize the event.

And Allianz AG has created its own permanent leadership academy in the dark. Two years ago, it blocked off 700 square meters at its Munich headquarters for the purpose. Dialogue in the Dark staff set up the infrastructure, recruited and trained blind guides, and helped tailor programs to the insurer's needs. A kick-off event drew 230 Allianz executives—board members included—to Bavaria for a day of parallel training sessions in the dark.

"If you want to keep the best talent, it's very good to invest in their development and create an environment built on trust," says Angelika Antz-Hieber, head of Allianz's Dialogue Training Center. "Our CEO and COO were convinced that such a training center, in-house, was a great way to do so."

Since opening the center two years ago, Allianz has trained more than 1,300 employees and clients; 70% are top executives. It pays a franchising fee to Dialogue in the Dark for the arrangement.

Dialogue in the Dark will launch an exhibit in New York's financial district this summer and intends to introduce its business offerings there as well. "We've had a boom in the seminar business, especially since the global financial crisis hit," says Mr. Heinecke. "I hope that will continue."

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