CONNECTIVE CLARITY

When Horses Invite You to Take up Authentic, Solution Focused Leadership

BOOK PREVIEW

WENDY VAN DEN BULCK

CONNECTIVE CLARITY

When Horses Invite You to Take up
Authentic, Solution Focused Leadership

WENDY VAN DEN BULCK

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Connective Clarity…
What is it exactly? What difference does it make? How can it be established?

The experts in providing answers to these questions are not at all interested in writing a book about it. They are too busy eating grass while being very alert to their surroundings, thoroughly choosing their actions in every moment, in constant interaction with each other. They live the concept of Connective Clarity by example because it is a part of their essence, communicated by a very simple yet powerful language that I named Unencumbered Communication (see Part 1).

In this book I am translating the answers that horses would give to the questions above, guiding you towards a **Connective Clarity model**. The model will be built up in Part 1 and Part 2 and, (if you can't wait to have a look…), shown in Part 3. In small and practical steps this book reveals how the answers and the model can inspire you as a leader in a natural, Solution Focused way.

Solution Focus is omnipresent in nature. I come across it every day in working with horses as a Solution Focus coach and consultant, mainly in academic contexts. The insights I have got from natural horse behaviour have thoroughly enriched my view on leadership communication.

Actions will describe this better than words. After all, the best hope I have for you reading this book is not that you merely *understand* the concept of Connective Clarity, nor that you become experts in horse behaviour. The best hope I have for you when reading this book is that you adopt the typical mindset that horses have, which is, "Interesting!" and feel challenged to *actually take small steps* to establish Connective Clarity as from the first chapter.

In each chapter I will provide:
- Background information
- Illustrations of (dealing with) horse behaviour and how it can be useful for you as a leader. You will recognise these stories because each is written in a frame
- Examples of how leaders and teams successfully applied the insights to establish (more) Connective Clarity. All the names I used in these examples are fictitious, except for the horses' names.

What if you and your team, your organisation, obtain better connections and better results in less time and with less effort because every member in your group (team, organisation) takes up responsibility to deliver and receive clear messages? What if they could do this when circumstances are somehow tense (changes, strained relations, difficult messages, …)?

And what if you managed to take up your role as leader in a (more) resilient way?

Let's go for the ride to discover what Connective Clarity is all about!

PART 1
From the Inside Out: What Do You Communicate?

Communication starts with you...
Nothing new, very simple, yet complex at the same time. After all, *when* does communication actually start? And who are *you*? Let's start with the second question.

I am the owner of my horses. That is clear to me and to people who know me. My ownership is even officially registered. For my horses, though, that doesn't mean a single thing. No "Thank you!" for all the food I buy, the mucking out, the dental care, the hoof care, the fence reparations, for whatever time and energy spent on them. For my horses it is what it is. Seeing myself as the owner of my horses puts an extra layer on the factual reality. Calling them *my* horses indicates something special in my perception of them.

Other people look at my horses through a different pair of glasses than I do, thus regarding my horses in a different perspective, seeing different things. Someone used to describe my Friesian mare Yakira as lazy, I would call her wise, not wasting energy on things that do not matter. Who of us is right? Both. And neither.

Underneath the layer of emotions, judgements and stories everything is information that is coloured by the pair of glasses you look through. Realise that the pair of glasses somebody else looks through is different from yours. Not better, not worse. Different.

Horses have taught me a language that enables people to talk about these differences in a non-judgemental way. I call this language Unencumbered Communication.

Unencumbered Communication

What is it about? And how can it be useful for you as a leader?

Unencumbered Communication leads to Connective Clarity: you get better connections and obtain better results in less time and with less effort because every member of your group (team, organisation) takes responsibility to deliver and receive clear messages.

Unlike what the complexity of this not commonly used word suggests, Unencumbered literally means unburdened, clear, unfettered. In language, burden shows in the words you use as well as in your body language and can consist of:
- your judgements
- your interpretations
- your emotions
- your assumptions
- your scenarios

As from now, I will refer to this burden as the *layer*. Very often you are not aware of this *layer*. After all, the way in which you see the world is obvious to you, just like it is self-evident that others understand your message the way you intend it, isn't it? However, have you ever realised that 'normally' in "Act normally!" can have countless different interpretations...? I will describe the impact of self-evidence in Part 3.

Let me explain Unencumbered Communication by using the metaphor of an orchestra. Through all wind instruments you blow air. The air is always the same, yet the instrument invariably makes this air sound differently. Air blown through a clarinet produces a different sound to air blown through a saxophone or a trumpet. Even air blown through two different saxophones may sound different. Reality is the air. It is what it is.

When you look at reality, and certainly when you describe your perception of reality, you are creating your 'sound'. After all, different people are like different instruments, with their individual sound. The air is neutral. The sounds are not They are coloured by the instrument the air was blown through.

Translated to communication the air is a message and the sounds are coloured by the *layer*.

Unencumbered Communication involves listening to the variety of sounds coming from so many different instruments with a mindset of curiosity. It also involves describing these differences and similarities, thereby knowing that there is an underlying message – *the naked message* – that is always ready to be explored.

Wouldn't it be great to apply this to your team? All team members have different messages, different sounds. What if you were able to bring those different messages in 'tune'?

I'm not asking you to eliminate 'burden' on messages, this would blur communication too much. What I want is:
- to alert you to the existence of ever-present noise in the messages you hear
- to invite you to describe this noise, and
- to explore it

My aim is twofold: clarity in communication and respect for the richness of differences in perception. Reality is what it is. And what you do with it.

How to Become Meaningful

There was another question mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, being *"When does communication actually start?"*. I believe all communication has to start with choosing a direction. In working with horses, I always start from the question:

"How do I become meaningful for this horse, in this moment?"

Becoming meaningful is a core element of leadership within the herd. It's not about winning or losing, being dominant or subordinate. It's about exploring, about taking initiative and giving direction to initiatives: about powerfully inviting others because of relevant qualities and true togetherness. It makes you a leader, not a boss (see Part 2, Core Element 3) and leads towards Connective Clarity.

"How do I become meaningful?" is a Solution Focused question that makes communication really start with you.

Are you ready to take the first three steps? The steps that invite you to **reflect** upon what you *really* want to say and to **prepare** yourself to communicate that message clearly?

Step 1: Have a Clear Message

When you enter a bakery and you just stand there, not saying a single word, you are likely to leave without any bread. And when you just say, "I want some bread", you might go home with something of which your housemates say, "That's not what we had asked for". It is important to have a *clear* message.

Logical, isn't it? Yes, indeed. Simple? Not at all.

Horses make their messages very clear: the direction in which they want to go, their clarity with regard to their personal space, their decision to run or to stay...

Amongst people it is often more complicated, "Is this really the direction to go right now?" "Won't my colleague be offended if I say no?" "Shouldn't I give it another try?"... Horses communicate messages; people often build stories.

The Impact of Mindset

Before you can accurately compile the specific message you want to deliver, it is important to choose the right mindset.

> Horses make you very aware of the impact of your mindset. For example, one morning when the police asked me to help them with an escaped horse running free, because they could not "catch" it. A prey animal – certainly when it is feeling uncomfortable – logically does not respond to the mindset, "*I'm going to catch you*". So, I approached the horse with the mindset, "*I'm going to take care of your safety*." It made a huge difference. Instead of running away every time he was approached, the scared gelding immediately started showing interest and soon felt safe enough to come to me by his own choice.

Your mindset shapes your message, and your *naked message* – the core essence of what you want to say - should fit on a post-it, written with a marker. Only then you have a message, otherwise you have a story.

What *Do* You Want?

One of the most difficult questions to be answered concisely is the Solution Focused question, "What do you want?" At least, it is difficult for many people to answer it.

> My horse Djohar is a master in making people aware of how helpful it is to know your *naked message*. Djohar can show rather pushy behaviour, and this often irritates the person who is walking with him. When I ask this person, "What do you want?", the first reaction often captures this person's irritation, "He is pushy, it is annoying". That is not an answer to my question, so I repeat my question, "What do you want?" An answer often heard is then, "I do not want him this close". That answer also doesn't bring us any further. What exactly is meant by, 'Not this close'? Knowing what you do not want can be helpful as a preparation, not as a message. After all, you can only head for something you *do* want, can't you?

Suppose you could enter, "Not to the sea", as a destination in your GPS, where on earth would you end up? I will come back to the GPS metaphor in Part 2, Core Element 2.

In nature, "no", "not", "do not" are pointless messages. When you pay extra attention to what you do not want, you even strengthen it. What is the first image that pops into your mind when I ask you not to think about a rabbit?... Right.

In nature, monkeys choose the branches they *do want* to jump at; horses choose the herbs they need to avoid and herbs they *do want* to eat. Nature itself invites you to direct your attention to what *does work*, to what you *do want*. Nature itself is Solution Focused: whatever is solution focused in nature has a better chance to survive.

When you indicate the distance you need to feel comfortable with the behaviour of Djohar, he instantly takes it into account. In Part 2 I will describe how you can make this happen.

People often start conversations from what they do not want. An example within organisations is the feedback conversation. How often do feedback conversations start from the unwanted behaviour instead of from the desired behaviour? How often can the desired behaviour actually be described?

React or Act? Factual reality, *Layer*, Mindset and *Naked Message*

Suppose the deadline of a mailing was yesterday and your team member has finished it only today. You want to give him/her feedback on this. Do you feel like criticising him/her for not having sent the mailing in time? Or do you want to find out what is needed to get next week's mailing out in time?

Different mindsets lead to different messages and thus to different conversations.

What to do? The choice is yours:

→ If you react spontaneously in this situation, the risk is that you describe nothing but the irritation in your *layer*, which colours your mindset, your message and what you see as factual reality. You will find yourself in a criticising mode before you even have said a word.

→ If you are aware of this risk and you want the conversation to be constructive from the start, you can choose to prepare to act rather than to automatically react by using Unencumbered Communication, distinguishing between:
  • factual reality
  • the *layer*
  • your mindset, and
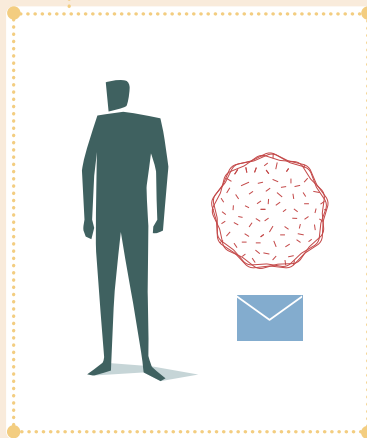 • your *naked message*

STEP 1
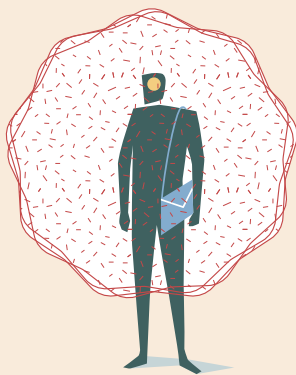
MINDSET AS A FRAME

MESSAGE < TO REACT   MESSAGE < TO ACT

■ = mindset
■ = what you see as factual reality
■ = your *layer* (judgements , interpretations, emotions, assumptions and scenarios)
■ = *naked* message

Having a clear message is not as easy as it seems. The way in which you see the world colours your naked message, and most of the time you are not aware of that. Your *layer* of judgements, interpretations, emotions, assumptions and scenarios then often blurs your *naked message* (see visual Step 1 a).

The first step is to become aware of this colouring and to get clarity about the different aspects of your communication at that moment: What is your mindset? What is do you see as factual reality? What is your layer? What is your naked message? (see visual Step 1b)

• Consciously choosing your **mindset** provides a framework for the communication, e.g. "Let's find out what is needed to get the mailing sent in time next week". Having a clear view on what you consider is the factual reality and on what your *layer* is, is an important next step.

- In the case described above, the **factual reality** you notice could be, "The deadline for this mailing was yesterday, he completed it today. It happened last week, too".
- The *layer*, described as information instead of as judgement, could in this case be, "I notice that the fact that the mailing has been sent too late is irritating me".
- Then decide on the *naked message* you want to deliver, e.g. "I want to make clear arrangements about next week's mailing".

By using Unencumbered Communication you step into conversations more consciously and better prepared. This is a critical condition when you want to give clear messages and to talk about differences in a non-judgemental way.

Tell a Story or Deliver a Message?

Is it always necessary to use Unencumbered Communication? When you want to tell a story, it isn't. When telling a story, for example about something you experienced during your holidays, your *layer* makes it *your* story. Stories are mostly about the past or about the future. You can't go back to your past, you can't change anything about it and you can't check anymore what reality exactly was like back then. You also can not foresee the reality of your future, You can only tell stories about your expectations. Your past and your future are shaped by your stories.

I invite you to make a clear distinction between telling a story and delivering a message. In working with horses, you:
- don't become meaningful by telling a story
- need to deliver a clear message

Wouldn't it be helpful if also in your organisation the distinction was made between telling colourful stories and delivering clear messages? Can you imagine what difference this would make?

Think of a moment in which you were irritated about your message not being taken into account or not being interpreted the way you intended it. Imagine you have to deliver the same message to the same person today.

1) Describe what – according to you – is the factual reality

2) Describe your *layer*: Wat are your judgements, your interpretations, your emotions, your assumptions and your scenarios concerning yourself in delivering the message? And what are they concerning your conversation partner in receiving the message?

3) Choose your mindset by answering the following question: What difference do you want your message to make? For you? For your conversation partner(s)?

4) Describe your *naked message*: What exactly do you want to say? (remember: it should fit on a post-it, written with a marker!)

In Unencumbered Communication, before you actually deliver the message "I'm going to saddle Chiarah", it is important to explore
- your ability ("Have I saddled Chiarah before?"), and
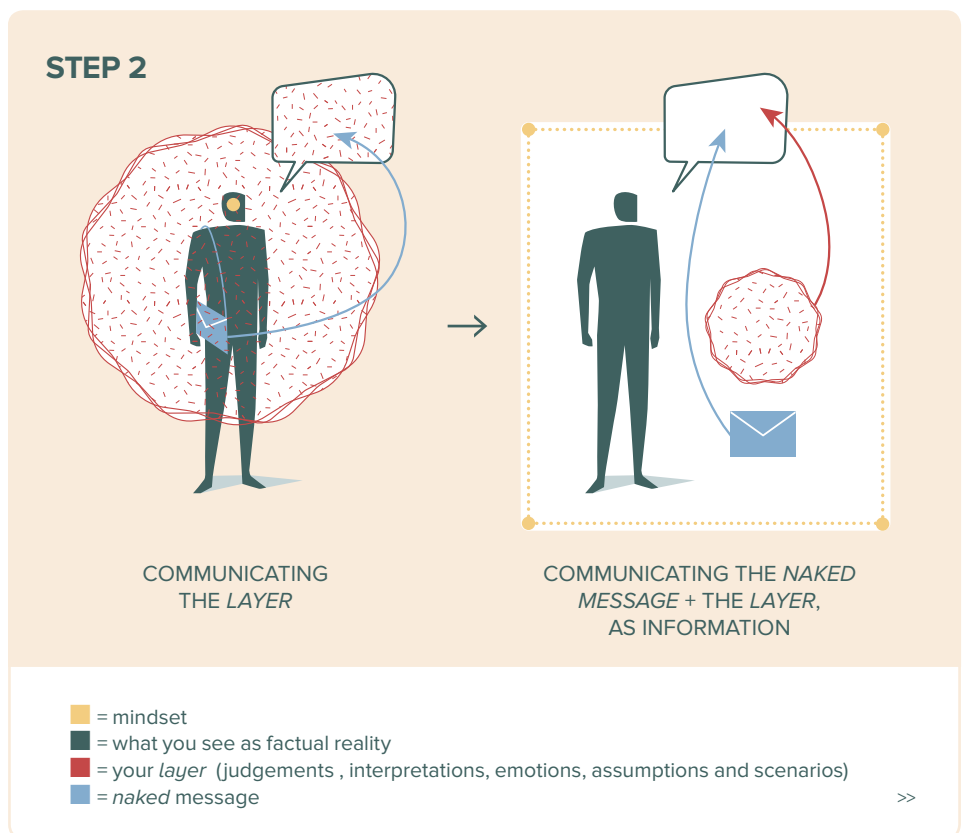- your willingness, ("Do I really want to saddle Chiarah?")

Is your answer to both questions a genuine "yes? Then you are very likely to communicate your message clearly.

Is your answer to one or both questions uncertain? You will *automatically* communicate this uncertainty in your *layer* (see visual Step 2, left side) unless you *consciously* make a choice:
- Do you decide to find out what you need in order to be able to saddle Chiarah?
  - Then choose your mindset, describe what you see as factual reality, describe your *layer* and phrase your *naked message* (see visual Step 2, right side)
- Or do you decide not to saddle her?
  - Then do something else... (See also Part 2, Core Element 1: Attention)

Both options are mere information, coming from a factual exploration of your ability and willingness in that situation, without any judgement.

When you answer the questions it is important to be specific enough. In the example mentioned above it is not about, "Have you saddled *a horse* before?". It is about, "Have you saddled *Chiarah* before?". After all, Chiarah's behaviour might differ from the behaviour of other horses you saddled before.

STEP 2

COMMUNICATING
THE *LAYER*

COMMUNICATING THE *NAKED MESSAGE* + THE *LAYER*,
AS INFORMATION

■ = mindset
■ = what you see as factual reality
■ = your *layer* (judgements , interpretations, emotions, assumptions and scenarios)
■ = *naked* message   >>

PART 2
From the Outside In: Dealing with Situations

"I told you!", "Let it go, it is not important", "You should have called her earlier", "You can't be serious!", "You are late again!

What if someone's reaction irritates you so much that your *layer* instantly and inevitably seems to take over all communication?

Part 1 of this book invites you to **reflect** on what you *really* want to say and to **prepare** yourself to deliver clear messages using Unencumbered Communication. Part 2 will describe how Unencumbered Communication can help you deal with – often unforeseeable - situations in a way that you can direct them towards Connective Clarity. In other words, Part 2 prepares you to **attune** and to **inter-act**.

React or Act?

In Step 1 of the first part of this book I described how you can *prepare* to act rather than to automatically react by distinguishing between
- factual reality
- the *layer*
- your mindset
- your *naked message*

Acting instead of reacting is also a foundation for directing situations towards Connective Clarity. How do horses deal with circumstances that are challenging to them?

When I was a child, my parents used to tell me that horses immediately kick, bite or flee when something frightens them. The more I learned about horses' true nature, the more I discovered that my parents' statement described the concern in their *layer* rather than the factual reality about horses.

Being prey animals, horses take good care of their energy: they do what is needed, when it is needed and with the volume that is needed. If in nature they were to flee every time they saw a predator, they would waste a lot of energy. After all, not all predators hunt every day.

The key to safety and sensible energy expenditure is the mindset, "Interesting!", that horses use to connect with their surroundings and with situations that occur in their surroundings.

A Basic Mindset of, "Interesting!"

When something unexpected attracts the attention of a horse, the horse will stand still and explore it by observing (mindset, "Interesting!") to gather the information that is needed to decide whether to flee or stay. They check whether the predator is hungry or not. This requires only a fraction of time and can be done from a large distance. Horses also constantly read each other's signals in order to stay attuned amongst themselves. In short, they are in a constant mode of Connective Clarity, which enables them to instantly communicate and act as needed.

For people, the mindset, "Interesting!" is an antidote to react automatically from their *layer*.

Exploring with the mindset, "Interesting!" is a Solution Focused action; there is a desired future (in the example of the horses and the predator mentioned above, to survive). The exploration gathers information about present options (flee or stay) and leads to actual small steps (well... preferably big steps in case of fleeing).

"Interesting!" as a basic mindset appears to be essential to establish Unencumbered Communication in dealing with situations that challenge your *layer*.

**MINDSET
"INTERESTING!"**

STOP

explore   or   **accept**

Adopting the mindset, "Interesting!" requires a brief **standstill**. Horses do that literally. In communication amongst people you can establish this by:
- Explicitly saying something like, "Hold on"; "Just a moment"
- Rephrasing what you experience as *layer* (of you and / or of your conversation partner) into information by:
  · *gathering* information (e.g. "What do you mean by saying...?")
  · *giving* information (e.g. "Your answer surprises me").

This requires only a fraction of time and enables you to install Connective Clarity as a desired future.

You can then choose how to proceed:
- Go into a further **exploration** ("How can we deal with this?")
- **Accept** the differences to be a limitation ("This is how I see it. That is how you see it. Let's agree to disagree")

"I told you!", "Let it go, it is not important", "You should have called her earlier", "You can't be serious!", "You are late again!" What if people in your team could save time and energy by exploring and acting with the mindset laid out in Part 1 of this book to deliver clear messages using Unencumbered Communication, thinking "Interesting!" instead of automatically reacting from within their *layer*? In the next chapters I will describe the core elements that help to make this happen.

Core Element 1: See Options through Attention 360°

When I was at studying at the university of Leuven, I once discovered the following Ethel Barrymore quote in a Chinese fortune cookie: *"You must learn, day by day, year by year, to broaden your horizon".* For some reason it triggered me, and I kept the small paper in my wallet for many years.

Working with horses has put this message in a whole new perspective. That one sentence actually states the bedrock of authentic leadership.

Attention 360°

Alertness is a strong capability of all horses. Actively scanning the environment to check whether the surroundings are safe, is an essential leadership quality. It is about
- having an overview,
- sensing opportunities, and
- estimating what is the most accurate thing to do

I deliberately say that it is a leadership quality and not that it is a leader's quality. After all, in a herd of horses each individual performs autonomously within the dynamics of the herd. Every individual plays a part in taking care of the safety of the herd, hence a kind of distributed leadership is created. [Bron: Bourjade Marie, Thierry Bernard, Hausberger Martine, Petit Odile (2015). Is Leadership a Reliable Concept in Animals? An Empirical Study in the Horse. [*https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4444174/*]

What horses pay attention to can easily be read from the movements of their ears. The ears show that horses continuously have attention 360°. Even when their attention is drawn to something and the horse seems to focus on it, pointing its ears towards the strange object, an ear moving from time to time shows they are at the same time still scanning their surroundings.

Think of it that horses have two dimensions in attention, linked to their visual behaviour.
[Bron: *https://www.researchgate.net/publication/12794416_Horse_vision_and_an_ explanation_for_the_visual_behaviour_originally_explained_by_the_'ramp_retina'*]

- Dimension 1 is the continuous scanning of their environment, like a radar does.
- Dimension 2 is that they accentuate attention.

Some things can get extra attention in a moment, but horses always keep their radar on. I will describe the metaphor of the radar later in this chapter.

Having a real focus for too long can be life threatening for a prey animal: while focusing on something in front, a horse might be attacked from behind. Attention 360° enables them to have an essential mental state of alertness, of being awake. Focus in nature is momentaneous, it is used only when needed since it requires a lot of energy and narrows attention. Predators have to focus on their prey in order to be able to catch it. When the hunt is over, they return to having their attention 360° again.

How can you benefit from these insights? First of all,

- Are you aware of how easily, how often or how long you are sometimes focusing?
- Even in situations in which it is not necessary (anymore)?
- Are you aware of the consequences of that?

Let me take an anti-skid course as an example. I did one, several years ago. I had been told that the cardboard boxes on the training square resembled big oak trees. When I braked and the car started to skid, my first reaction was to focus on the boxes while thinking, "No, not towards the oak trees!" just before bumping into them. I unwillingly ended up where I had put my focus.

The second time I had to brake the only thing the instructor said was, "Where *do* you want to go?". I switched my focus from the boxes into seeing the space next to the boxes and the car followed my attention. Only after this I learnt the additional steering techniques, which could only become helpful with a correct use of my attention first.

For horses it might be easier to have their attention 360° than for humans. After all, horses have an almost 360° vision, humans have only half of that. We mostly pay attention to what we observe, and this often brings us into focus. Horses invite us to observe what we pay attention to, and that definitely broadens our horizon.

I recently spoke with Paul, a team manager of an operational team, having to deal with errors in a system that registered the hours people had worked. Due to the errors, some payments went wrong, which caused a lot of concern. According to Paul, because of the many complaints the team had the feeling that nothing currently worked well anymore. Everyone focused on the errors and their consequences. Until Paul decided to get out of focusing on the mistakes. He asked for the complete figures and what appeared was that 95% of the system in fact worked well. The mistakes occurred in 5% of all the cases. This shift in attention did not solve the problems directly, but it changed the attention and hence the mindset of the team. Instead of being demotivated because of the conviction that "Everything went wrong", they felt challenged to find the bugs in the system to increase the 95% that worked well. And they succeeded.

You get stuck in your *layer* when you focus on only one option, allowing that option to become so big that it feels like it is the only option. And it never is. There are always other options, even if only theoretically.

Having your attention 360° is a very solution 'focused' action. It drags you away from focus on the problem to being aware that there are always opportunities, even when you do not see them (yet).

Metaphor of the Radar

ATTENTION

⇒ **OPTIONS**

Being able to have your attention 360° is an important leadership quality.
Attention 360° is important for
- having an overview
- sensing opportunities
- estimating what is the most accurate thing to do

Yet, how do you do this, particularly in situations that trigger you into focus? You do not have horse's ears that constantly scan the surroundings; how might you broaden your horizon, even when you feel stuck?
The answer lies in the metaphor of the radar – the human version of horses' ears – and how, using Unencumbered Communication, it invites you towards the mindset of "Interesting!".

On the radar in a ship, all neighbouring ships light up. Focusing on only one nearby ship can be dangerous since another might be approaching faster. The metaphor of the radar invites us to always ask the solution focused, "What else?" question and its variants. What else can be done? Who else can help with this? Where else can it take place? What other moment might be suitable? If the radar stops sweeping and fixes on only one target – when you get stuck in focus – situations might become pretty dangerous.

A focus on problems, fixed routines, ("We do it this way because it has always been done this way"), self-evidence, ("She will do it") can all prevent your radar sweeping around, thus keeping you out of the mental state of alertness that is needed to see opportunities. A first small step is to figuratively push the beam of your radar so that it starts moving again. Describe the options, even if they are merely theoretical, even if you would not think of choosing for them.

In an individual coaching, a team leader, Iris, indicated that she felt stuck in the communication with her CEO. She had been in the leadership position ad interim for many years. She described how the CEO had blocked her appointment many times. She said she wanted to stay. She loved her job and her team, and the team was achieving great results. The only disturbing factor to her was the behaviour of the CEO towards her and the impact this had on her as a person. I asked for the options she saw, even those she would never choose. After some hesitation she started to describe some, try to have another conversation with him, ignore his behaviour as much as possible, ask for help, have a conversation with the general manager, quit the job, take sick leave, ... In the beginning, many of her descriptions were followed by "but,..."

and she got stuck in her *layer* again. I asked her to just describe the options, as information, without choosing or drawing conclusions yet. She did, and this exercise started to broaden her horizon. By describing the options as opportunities, just listing what came on her radar, as mere information, she opened up. It didn't instantly solve her problem, it prepared her better to make proper choices.

Have an overview first, see the opportunities, then make a choice.

Be the Centre Point of Your Radar

Just like a horse is always in between its ears, it is important for you to anchor firmly in the centre point of your radar. If not, you risk being swayed between the different options, like in a pinball machine. It happened in the example above, when the coachee started to "but…" every option she mentioned.

> I also recognised it with my Friesian mare Wiarda. She came to us when she was two years old, and for a long time she reacted very much to everything. She barely explored things and easily ended up in a flight reflex. While getting older and more mature, she became more stable and really started to explore her surroundings instead of reacting to them. I guided her in this by doing what I did in the coaching described above. Firmly anchored in the centre of my radar, looking for options and thus inviting the other to do the same. Wiarda has kept her alertness, she is often the first one to observe things. The difference is that now she stays between her ears instead of rushing to or away from whatever these ears point at.

This is how the two dimensions of attention work properly in the metaphor of the radar:
- Dimension 1: continuous 360° sweeping of the radar with you firmly anchored in the centre, leading towards **constant alertness**
- Dimension 2: when noticing something (when something lights up on the radar):
  - Step 1: **mindset, "Interesting!"**
  - Step 2: **explore** → "Is this of interest?"
  - Step 3: **action** → do what is needed, when it is needed (see next chapter)

Think of how you experience this in driving a car. When you feel comfortable driving that car then you can have constant 360° attention, watching the traffic in front of you and at the same time being aware of what is going on around you. You can shift gear, look in your mirrors, use your blinkers, brake or accelerate when needed, estimate distances and keep notice of the traffic signs, and all this almost effortlessly. At least, when you feel comfortable.

It was different when you were learning how to drive a car, wasn't it? Do you remember focusing on shifting the gear, being too late or shifting to the wrong gear, resulting in the car to jolt? Or when looking in your mirror, you steered too much to the side of the street? Do you remember how difficult it was to brake properly?

When you get into a situation you regard as uncomfortable, this is a big trigger to lose the overview and to focus on the different aspects that highlight on the radar (the gears, the clutch etc). It happens to leaders, too. When getting into new or complex situations, you might feel

like you are learning how to drive a car again. What happens is that you then lose the first dimension of attention and get into this:

- <u>Dimension 1</u>: continuous 360° sweeping of the radar with you firmly anchored in the centre, leading towards **constant alertness**
- <u>Dimension 2</u>: when noticing something (when something lights up on the radar):
  - Panic, over-enthusiasm, caution, under- or overestimating,… → your **_layer_ is activated**
  - **Jumping into action**, steered by your _layer_
  - **Noticing something else** on the radar
  - Panic, over-enthusiasm, caution, under- or overestimating,… → your **_layer_ is activated**
  - **Jumping into action**, steered by your _layer_
  - …

The first step you need to take to regain the overview, is to consciously activate the first dimension of attention, first by accepting that you are going through a logical process and next by figuratively giving a swing to the beam of your radar. Be aware of the fact that – be it theoretically – there are always options and that it is very often more about seeing them than about having to create them. It is what the team leader did in the example described earlier, when he decided to step out of the problem focus and asked for the overall facts and figures. It will activate, "Interesting!", the utmost important mindset of Unencumbered Communication. It is not only the beginner's feeling that triggers the beam of your radar to get stuck. Fixed routines are, too. If you are used to driving a car that has parking sensors, and you have borrowed a friend's car which does not have them, a continuous state of alertness will be helpful as well…

For horses, continuously having their radar on with the two dimensions mentioned above is an innate constant that is essential to survive. I believe this 360° attention is also of utmost importance to establish authentic leadership.

What if you could also bring this open and unencumbered state of alertness in your team? What if people switched on their radar and were more aware of opportunities?
"Interesting!", you say? Yes, that's the first step! The route to Connective Clarity starts with curiosity.

Practice your innate radar when something unexpected happens and you have to act or when you need to make a decision. A way to do this is using the, "What else?" question.
- What options do you see, even those you would not choose for? What else?
- What options highlight on your radar? What else? Explore them:
  - What difference will this option make? Is it of interest now?
  - What does considering this option do with you? What else?
  - What is factual reality? What is _layer_?

Find ways to activate your radar in daily situations.
- Look around, and make contact with what you see. What is new to you? What is different? What had you not seen before?
- Listen to the sounds in and around you. Were you aware of the sound of your breath? What sounds do you hear around you that you had not heard before?
- What helps you to be aware of the (other) options there always are?
- What helps you to stay in the centre point of the radar, also in situations that trigger you into your _layer_?

Core Element 2: Make Choices by Defining a Direction

As described in the previous chapter, seeing the options on your radar is an important starting point. And it can be pretty bewildering, too...

Having nine horses, six hectares of meadows, being a freelance coach and consultant, giving my own programmes with the horses and writing a book results in a seemingly endless to do list. I am pretty good at keeping an overview of things to do, and I make a plan for every day. The thing is that in planning I tend to see much more things that highlight on my radar than what fits in the day that lies ahead. When the day shortens faster than my to do list, my *layer* often takes over, "I should have done that first", "I should not have spent so much time on this", "if only I had..." and this might then lead to anything but choosing. I would probably still try to do as much as possible, not finishing things properly or having a short night's sleep.

Get off the Roundabout!
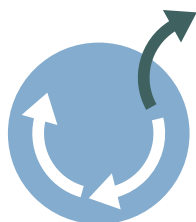
As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is important to turn on you radar and see options. You can drown in them though, if you do not make genuine **choices**. Not making choices is like continuously driving on a roundabout. Over and over again you pass by the same options, and every time you pass by, you may see even more. All these options are things you would love to do, things that might be interesting to do, things you feel you have to do. Things that might push you into chaos if you do not make a decision.

How do horses deal with the different options that appear on their radar? They choose one and act accordingly. One choice, one action. If they decide to flee, they flee. If they decide to eat, they eat.

Unlike humans. How often do you drive on the roundabout of indecisiveness? "Is this really a good idea?", "Suppose she becomes mad?", "Is this the right moment?", "What if I can't handle the consequences?" By continuously driving on a roundabout you will empty your fuel tank getting nowhere. The only way to get off a roundabout is to choose an exit and to find out whether or not you can do something with this option. If yes, you keep on driving; if not, you choose another option. And you can choose only one option at a time.

Define Your Direction

⇒ CHOICES

In the context of making choices I want to introduce the metaphor of the GPS. What I like about the metaphor is that
- it invites you to **go somewhere**
- it requires **specificity**

Inviting you to go somewhere is very solution focused. What *do* you want? Where *do* you want to go? What is your best hope? I already referred to this in Part 1 of this book, when I described the importance of having a clear message. Here, I use the metaphor as a tool to deal with situations in an unencumbered way.

> My oldest mare Manou gives instant feedback on how you use your GPS. When you are clear about your direction, then walking with her is like dancing. She picks up your attention flawlessly. Often when she walks with someone, I see her start to take the bend the person intends to take, even before the person physically takes it. When you are not clear about your direction, Manou takes over. It then seems as if she cuts you off or stubbornly dives into the grass, but in fact she is just giving you information about the lack of clarity in your direction. The moment you are clear again, the dance continues.

In handling conflicts, installing a common direction in the 'team's GPS' leads to Connective Clarity. Due to a reorganisation in a governmental institution, I once facilitated the process of bringing two teams with very different histories and cultures together as a single team. One team was used to top-down leadership and strict and individual follow-up. The other team was more self-empowered, assessments were based on reaching team goals.

In the first two sessions with this newly created team, I worked on installing their joint direction. It appeared that despite the many differences they had in the present, they had a common wish for the future.

The challenge was to turn that common wish into a specific 'address'. After all, you can't enter 'the mountains' as a destination in a GPS. In order to really get somewhere, a *specific* address

is required. How they first described their desired future was, to become a constructive and motivated team with good collaboration, clear procedures and open communication. To me, that was not even 'the mountains' as a destination, it sounded more like, 'somewhere on Earth'.

We fine-tuned every item of their desired future, using solution focused questions, e.g.:
- What difference will it make when there is good collaboration?
- What will you be doing?
- What will your colleagues be doing?
- How will you and they notice this?

As a result of this exploration we planted a 'flag', a specific address to enter in their team - GPS. As from that moment their direction became clear. Two-weekly meetings would be organised with the whole team, during which they would work on the realisation of the items mentioned above. An organisation structure was made, roles were divided.

It did not immediately solve all the problems they were having. However, they at least moved their focus away from their problems and the feeling of being stuck by:
- Turning on their **radar** to see the options
- Defining their **direction**

Goal or Destination?

You choose whether the address you enter in your GPS is a goal or a destination.

For a predator, its prey is a goal. Wild horses living a nomadic life tend to travel back and forth throughout the same general regions. [Bron: Davis, J. Facts on how Wild Horses Get Their Food. *https://animals.mom.me/wild-horses-food-4536.html*] The grass areas they head for are destinations, not goals. What is the difference?

First, a goal is something you want to reach as soon as possible, and if something comes between you and your goal, it mostly leads to irritation.

Imagine working towards a deadline and a colleague gives you a call. He wants your urgent advice on a topic you are more familiar with. You actually have no time for this conversation. I am quite sure your *layer* would easily be activated by some degree of irritation.

Additionally, when a goal is reached, you either stop or choose another. If a predator succeeds in catching and eating a prey, he stops hunting. If he fails to catch the prey he was focusing on, he has to find another one. Or stay hungry.

Using the metaphor of the GPS, heading for a destination can be different from wanting to reach a goal. If you enter an address in your GPS, you know the device will get you there by giving you direction. If a road is blocked, it will lead you through another. If you're driving through beautiful surroundings and you choose to take another route than the original one, your GPS will – sometimes after trying a while to lead you back to the original route - recalculate and adjust to the new route. You can even choose to switch direction by changing your destination.

This is what happens in a herd of horses, too. Living a nomadic life in the wild, they always travel to more or less the same grass areas. After all, there is a high chance that there will be good grass and herbs where they previously found good grass and herbs. If on the way a

passage they used to take is blocked by uprooted trees, they will stick to their direction and act according to their inner GPS. They will see an alternative route on their radar (see previous chapter) and take it. A detour is nothing but an alternative path.

Making a difference between goals and destinations is a leadership quality that initiates Unencumbered Communication and leads to better care of energy. Define goals for the prey you have to catch, the (often) short term well-defined end points, like reaching deadlines. Formulate destinations for the grass areas you want to go to, your direction, the (often) longer term dreams, best hopes, the dot on the horizon.

HEADLINES	
GOAL (e.g. deadlines)	**DESTINATION** (e.g. best hope, direction, dot on the horizon)
• You want to reach it as soon as possible	• You trust you will get there, when is a matter of time
• Your *layer* (irritation, stress) is easily activated when something comes in between you and your goal	• A detour is nothing but an alternative path
• Invites to / requires focus on the result	• Most attention is on the process, exploring options
• When a goal is reached: · You let it go, or · You choose another goal	• When a destination is reached: · You dwell there, or · You choose a next destination

Choosing for What Is Wanted? Or for What Is Needed?

Amongst horses, choosing is a different process than amongst people. Horses decide upon their actions out of an exploration of the surroundings. When encountering predators, the horses' decision to flee or stay depends on whether the predators are hungry or not. Horses' actions are decisions taken as a result of what is *needed*. People often make choices as an answer to the question, "What do I / others *want*?"

Choosing feels easy when, "What is wanted", coincides with, "What is needed". But what if it does not? A leadership position implies that you have to give corrective feedback, use a more directive style when needed, give bad news. This is what is needed in your role of *leader* but might not be what you really want to do as a *person*. In making this distinction and acting accordingly, it again helps to choose your direction.

When reality doesn't live up to what is wanted, you still have to do what is needed.

When you act out of what you want or what others want instead of what is needed, you take the risk that you:
• stick to known paths, or
• lose yourself, jumping at every opportunity that appears on your radar.

For horses, both options are unhelpful. When the known watering places dry up and they do not look for alternatives, they die. If a herd moves aimlessly towards any grass area, they do not get to learn the safe routes and the hiding places, which creates more stress.

As a leader, both options are unhelpful too.

- Sticking to known paths:
  I recently talked to an ambitious PhD student, Tom, who felt he was heading towards a bore-out. He experienced his supervisor as very rigid on methods used and reluctant to changes of any kind. Tom stated that whenever he came up with an idea of making things more efficient, the answer he got was a straight "no". When asked what made the supervisor stick to the old ways, the answer was, "Because we have been doing it this way for quite some time and it works". Tom was at the brim of quitting his PhD project, his ambition and hunger for innovation not being fed and not finding a way to cope with that.

- Lose yourself, jumping at every opportunity that appears on your radar:
  Another PhD student, Laura, also doubted whether to move on with her project. In her case the reason was the addition of her own ambition and that of her supervisor, combined with children and a busy social life. She had trouble saying "no", or at least "stop". I will describe the difference between these two messages in the next chapter. Laura tended to jump on every opportunity that highlighted on her radar. There was fear of missing out, perfectionism and the conviction that she always had to do as much as possible. Her supervisor nourished this lifestyle by doing the same. It appeared to be a perfect burn-out recipe.

What happens when, instead, as a leader you start from acting out of exploring what is *needed*, not from what is *wanted*? Let's look at an example.

Brent is a team leader of a team in a governmental organisation. His team has been working well together for about eleven years. Brent asked for team coaching because the team energy was murmuring instead of flowing. As Brent said, "Relations are good, results are good, but the team's energy is stagnating. We need to become more awake". Some team members were very enthusiastic to join the process, coming up with ideas and solutions. Others were reluctant, bringing up objections and reasons to maintain the current harmony.

In the team coaching we listened to what everyone wanted, however, we did not focus on the differences in opinions. We focused on the team's direction – being an awake team, seeing and inviting innovation on both results and cooperation – by working on questions like, "What is our team identity?" "What difference do we want to make with our team?" "What do we have to be extraordinarily good at?" "What is already working well?" In three sessions the team clarified and polished up their destination and started to take small steps in that direction, with renewed energy.

If you do not choose a direction, you easily react out of your *layer*. In the example described above, it would have been easy to get into a discussion. Ask people why they want or do not want to step into the process and they might instantaneously start to convince each other by defending their own point of view.

If you have a desired future, a destination, you increase the chance that people will see and do what is needed to move into that direction.

Do you always have to choose a destination and enter it as an address in your GPS? No, you don't. If you choose to stroll along known paths for a while, or to go for some adventure out of a, "we will see what happens and then we will deal with it", mode, you need not use your GPS. I invite you to deliberately make it a choice whether or not you use your GPS by being aware of the consequences of your choice. Always strolling along known paths or always heading for adventure are not helpful attitudes in your role as a leader. Nor as a person.

HEADLINES	
When choosing for what is **wanted**:	When choosing for what is **needed**:
• You stick to known paths · Might lead to stagnation	• You anchor yourself in the centre point of your radar by coming to a brief standstill (see Part 2: introduction)

• Or you jump at every opportunity that appears on your radar
  · Might lead to being swayed between the options as if you are in a pinball machine
	• You explore the different options out of the basic mindset of, "Interesting!"
	  · Your choice is a conscious decision

⇒ triggers communication out of the *layer*	⇒ leads to Unencumbered Communication

Right versus Wrong Choices?

When you are driving on the previously described roundabout of indecisiveness, looking at all the options on your radar, then know that it's not the options that are passing by. The options are there, and you choose:
- Will you keep on driving in circles of indecision, passing by the options?
- Or will you use your indicator, give your steering wheel a turn and start a new exploration journey?

The difficulty with choosing is that:
- You might be afraid to make the wrong choice
- You might fear to close doors
- You might feel obliged – by others or by yourself – to make choices

Such choices aren't genuine choices, you do not really get off the roundabout, since in the background there is this little voice, "Is this really a good idea?", "Suppose she becomes mad?", "Is this the right moment?", "What if I can't handle the consequences?" "Suppose this is a wrong choice?"

Horses do not live in indecisiveness, nor in right or wrong choices. Horses explore, they choose, and everything that comes from that choice is information they will subsequently use.

In other words, when you make a choice, you also choose the consequences of that choice. Also *not choosing* or *choosing not to take action* is a choice. With consequences.

How can this be helpful in your team?

Right and wrong originate when you see *your* perspective as *the* truth. *Right* aligns with how you see things, *wrong* is what is different from your view. This often leads to communication between the *layers*, causing irritation and (open or underlying) conflicts.

When *right or wrong* becomes *different* out of the mindset, "Interesting!", differences suddenly become enriching. Everything then turns into information, an endless pallet of options, out of which you can co-create by making choices.

HEADLINES	
Seeing your perspective as **the** truth	Seeing your perspective as **a** truth

• Other perspectives are right / wrong
   · Communication out of the *layer*
	• Other perspectives are just different
	   · Unencumbered Communication

In a team coaching I wanted to break through the team's pattern of continually driving on the roundabout of indecisiveness by complaining about how badly organised the system was, without undertaking any constructive action.

I did not tell them that complaining was "wrong". I asked them solution focused questions like "What do you want instead?", "What are things you do have an impact on?", "What is a small action you can undertake?", "What difference would that make for you?". In doing this, they became aware that
- complaining is a choice, with consequences (no change, much irritation, communication out of *layers*)
- deciding to make the difference between problems and limitations is a choice, with consequences (Unencumbered Communication, focusing energy on what they believed they could have impact on, Connective Clarity).

Due to this awareness, they chose to get off the roundabout.

Choices Have Consequences

Choices aren't right or wrong, they can be easy or hard, though. After all, you do not always choose what and who comes into your life, and when something happens in your life, you have to deal with it. What about choice then?

Anna, a participant in a training session on solution focused communication told me that she had been fed up with her job for quite some time now, but she could not quit since she was living on her own with two young children and she still had a mortgage to pay. She said her situation obliged her to keep on doing the job she did not like doing anymore. I left a silence and another participant picked up the message that was hanging in that silence. He said, "You could choose to sell your house". Anna immediately reacted, "I would never think of doing that", after which she became aware of the fact that deciding not to sell her house was in fact her choice. She wrote me a mail after the training. The insight had not changed the situation, but it had changed her perspective of the situation. She chose to install keeping her house as a direction and so decided to keep on doing the job for now.