

brunner ::



Trust is a precondition for successful business coaching. “We go straight to the heart of the matter,” says furniture maker Dr. Marc Brunner. He values the openness and experience of his business coach Anette Bartram.

## NEW GENERATION

# THE SON ALSO RISES

The father founded this family-run furniture-making company. Now the next generation is taking over, and a new age is dawning. This is clear to the employees as well. While numerous books have been written on how to manage generational change in medium-sized companies, it's not the theory that counts but rather the practice. Dr. Marc Brunner is aware of this. That is why he sought out a business coach, who has been observing him at work. He has learned a good deal in the process, including about himself.

📧 KATHARINA BECKER    📧 ANDREAS KÖRNER

It would be easy to miss Rheinau-Freistett on a map. A small town with attractive half-timbered houses, it lies in the Baden region on the upper Rhine River plains near the border with France, where a mild climate brings forth good wines. In this pastoral idyll, a company like Brunner GmbH, with its 400 employees, is a heavyweight. It makes high-quality tables and chairs for hotel lobbies, cafeterias, lecture halls, airports, and concert halls, often designing them specially for individual customers. Founded and expanded since 1977 by Rolf Brunner, it has now been taken over by the next generation, led by his eldest son, Dr. Marc Brunner (36). Dr. Brunner quickly discerned what everyone probably realizes when they step onto the bridge as captain for the first time: directing an entire crew while keeping the vessel on course is a two-pronged endeavor that takes a lot of energy plus something like a sixth sense. Brunner himself of course brought the requisite energy. But to refine this additional “sensor,” he made the wise decision to bring some support on board. This took the form of a woman with sharp powers of analysis and tact.

“First-generation family companies are often dominated by the founder or patriarch,” says Brunner, who joined his parents on the executive board in 2004. “Our father is someone who makes quick decisions and gets down to business.” In his opinion, that’s exactly what you want in the early phase of a company. “If it keeps on growing, however, you can’t have the employees continue to first clear every question with the boss.” Brunner noticed that all the urgent issues of the day were leaving him scarcely any time for major strategic matters such as new designs or business fields. Something had to change. “I was familiar with all of the theory on leadership and self-organization. There probably isn’t a manager around who doesn’t have the relevant reference works at home,” he notes. “The problem lies in putting theory into practice. It’s incredibly hard to break through your own routines.” And so in 2010, Brunner decided to engage a sparring partner. Four criteria were crucial to him in making his selection: the ability to get things done, a focus on results, experience, and trust.

That’s how Anette Bartram came to the company. A principal at Porsche Consulting and a business coach, she has been observing the young businessman as well as his managers. “I experience first-hand how he deals with employees, works through projects, and structures his day,” she says. “We then discuss these observations and agree on the three most important points that should run measurably better in the future.” The boss is under observation. “Ms. Bartram is an indefatigable business coach,” remarks Brunner. “She keeps on reminding me of our agreements until I fulfill them.”

One of Brunner’s promises was to delegate more: no easy task for a perfectionist like him. It requires confidence in the abilities of his staff. As Bartram observes, “You can’t give in to the temptation to quickly

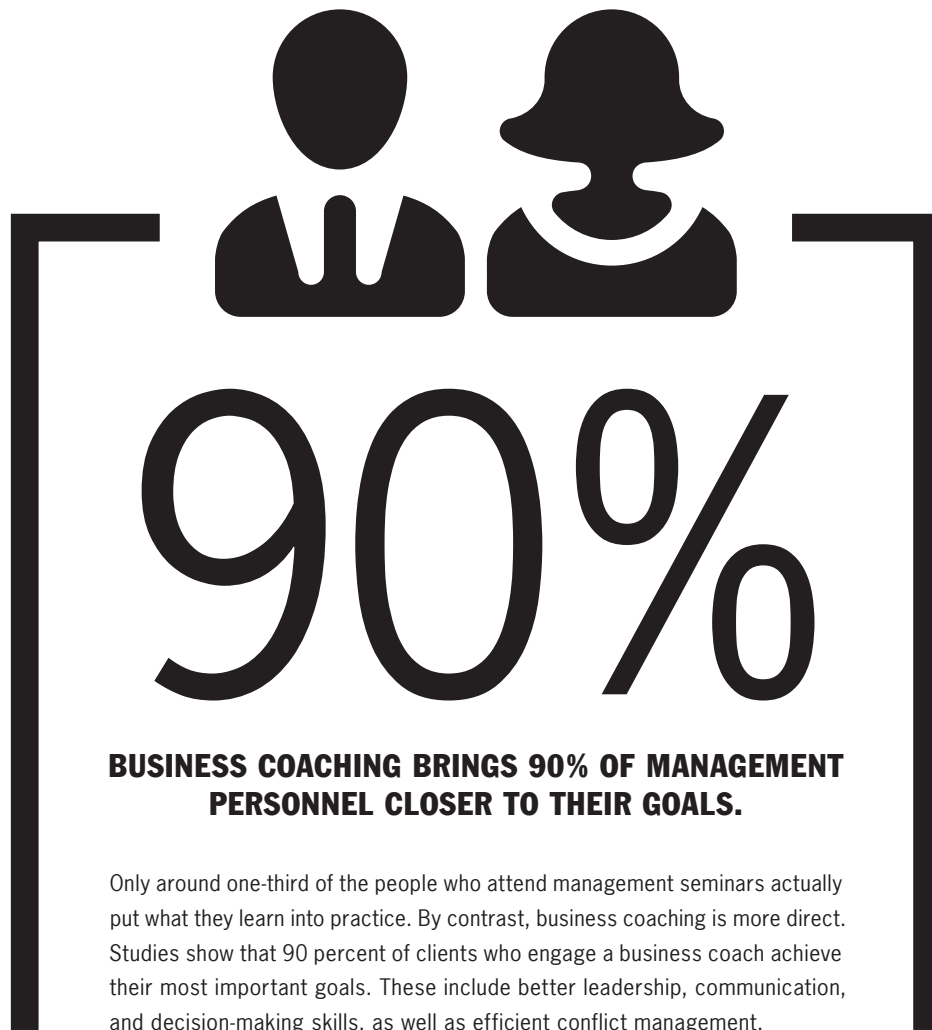


**Dr. Marc Brunner is an example of the change in culture from a company founder to the next generation and a different style of leadership. Business coach Anette Bartram has observed him frequently at work over a period of months and served as a mirror for his management style. “We’ve laughed a lot, although it surely hasn’t always been funny for him,” she says.**

finish the task yourself if it’s not going quite right.” And as Brunner now knows, “That’s the only way to manage growth.” Such was the case with the new A-Chair. A connoisseur of design, Brunner put a lot of time and passion into this stackable chair with legs in the shape of an “A.” When a new employee was charged with taking over the already existing marketing campaign, Brunner became annoyed if something didn’t go quite as he had envisioned. “That wasn’t fair because there were a lot of things she couldn’t have known,” he now notes after having realized this in a talk with his coach. “So I sat down with this new employee and explained the entire background and my ideas.”

“As a manager I have to empower others to achieve results,” Brunner says. “That includes adapting my style to each employee, which could mean a lighter touch for some, or very clear instructions, goals, and supervision for others.” People’s characters do not change, but their different talents can be put to use in more targeted ways. Management has to proceed on an individual basis. In the process, decisions may not be dictated but instead have to be left partially or entirely to the respective employee—that is what Brunner calls a change in culture. “It’s wonderful to see how this enables people to grow,” he says.

To master the great number of tasks, he also had to learn how to organize his time more efficiently. “Frustration is a foregone conclusion if you approach each day like a 24-hour race and plan every second of it,” says Bartram. Today, Brunner’s schedule contains defined blocks of time for different projects, along with priorities and buffer zones.



He's convinced that "if I want to achieve something, I've got to set an example for others. Change starts with me, and never stops." The next item on the operational level, for example, will be to tackle the pile of periodicals in his office, where catalogues and design magazines have been accumulating. The pile grows larger every week. "It irritates me and gives me a bad conscience that I haven't gone through it," he admits. Bartram and Brunner discuss various options. Reading the magazines when traveling? Too much to carry around. Plowing through them on weekends? Out of the question for a new father. Commissioning someone else to read them? At most, that would kick the problem down the road. Ever larger piles bind time and energy to no good purpose. Bartram notes that often only a radical step can help: throwing everything into the trash and starting over with a set routine—disposing of some immediately, passing on others to employees, and reading selected ones yourself. So that no more piles build up.

"You might very well think that with a business coach at your side, everything will go well," says Brunner. But it's far easier to achieve results with an external coach whom you trust and who doesn't water down her observations. "We go straight to the heart of the matter," he then remarks. He does have to be ready for analysis and open to criticism, "but she always manages to package it well," he says with a wink. "We've laughed a lot, although it surely hasn't always been funny for him," remarks Bartram.

In describing her work to develop leadership personnel and manage change, Bartram says that she starts by setting the course and pace and pulling her client along behind. Then the two of them walk abreast for a while, like one might on a hike. "Then I fall back, give advice or corrections from offstage, and confirm his course. At some point he'll turn around and I'll just wave at him from afar." ←