

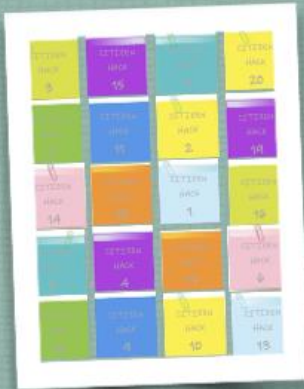
(Soft) Citizen Skills Matter

11 / 20 HACKS

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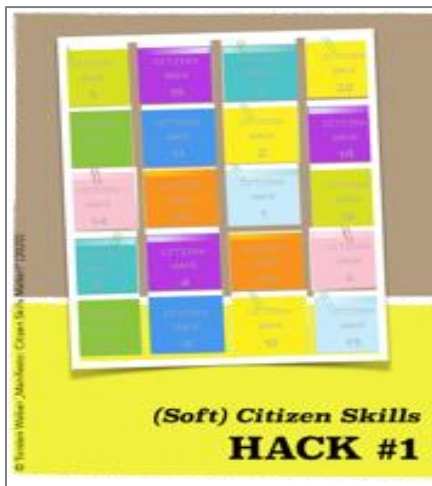


What are (Soft) Citizen Skills Hacks?



- (1) *They are not brand new (neither are “grandma’s household life hacks” on YouTube, but they are still good).*
- (2) *They may not be intellectually impressive (neither are most management innovations which often are as well simple remakes of fundamental “forgotten social techniques”).*
- (3) *They don’t include “hard” citizen skills like “inform yourself about the candidates in the next mayoral election”.*
- (4) *Many hacks are inconvenient! It is human that we mostly follow more comfortable and more egocentric reflexes which offer a quicker reward. Changing a pattern can be annoying.*
- (5) *They are partly overlapping (= not mutually exclusive) and certainly not collectively exhaustive. And that is alright! 😊*

Please share your comments and post your examples for these or other “citizen hacks” – as little stories or short videos... Why not starting a challenge – as cool and global as the “Ice Bucket Challenge”, but one that matters even more?



Don't blame others!
It's about you!
Therefore know yourself!

(27 October 2020)

Let's start with the very beginning! At least since Ancient Greek times, "know thyself" is a known, yet underestimated basic skill. "If you want to lead others, learn to lead yourself" is therefore the first module of any professional leadership development programme.



What are your core beliefs? Where do you (unconsciously) follow social norms you would actually like to overcome? Which of your behavioural patterns have helped you in life, which have not? Etc.

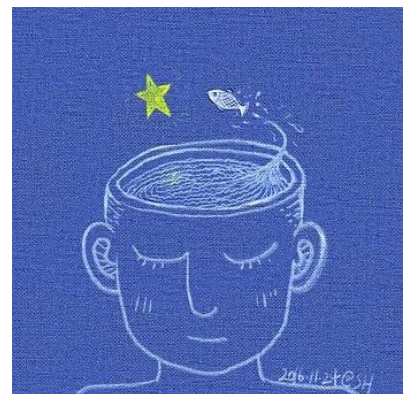
Sounds like bullshit bingo, but is nonetheless crucially important!!!

So, what to do to make things happen in society? Well, it's like in your job: Start with increasing your [self-efficacy](#) - only this time in your role as a citizen (also check ["Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter" \(Part I\)](#)):

- Take more time to strengthen your self-awareness and practice regular self-reflection.
- Be a sparring partner for friends and colleagues who ask for your reflection support.
- Create self-reflection spaces for others within your circle of influence.

Just to illustrate the latter, two concrete cases which I am currently co-creating with others:

- 1) University MBA programme:
Offering a reflection circle around "Basics in Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology" instead of introducing the 7th compulsory marketing or finance course. Why? The marginal utility of time spent seems to be much higher – both for society AND for the graduates' future careers.
- 2) Private equity and consulting firm:
Investing in the self-reflection skills of all professionals in order to challenge the mindset and behavioural patterns deeply embedded in their industry. Why? Those pioneers are convinced that with the increasing VUCA challenges threatening their own business models, being a subject matter expert and a "confident idiot" (David Dunning) won't be sufficient any longer.





Act as a citizen,
not only as a consumer,
parent, or career climber!

(29 October 2020)

Just a couple of additional thoughts:

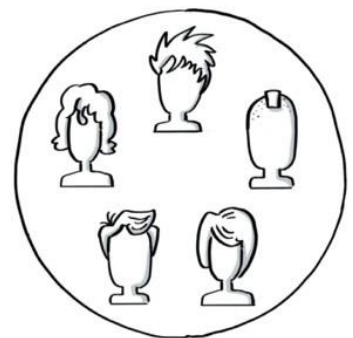
- Let's be aware that the multiple roles residing in us may be conflicting and may lead to cognitive dissonances.



- Let's spend more time co-creating a society which is more than a mirror of our financial interests. It's 2020, after all!
- Let's try to overcome our "post-competitive embitterment disorder" ([Heinz Bude](#), German sociologist) that helps us to justify our "Me and my family first" attitude. Albeit understandable, it may ultimately lead to a societal "[prisoner's dilemma](#)" which doesn't really help anyone of us. With a strong multi-partial citizen perspective, we would also act as role models for "multilateralism" within our circle of influence. Or to put it differently: How can we expect from heads of state to invest in cooperation if we don't do it in our own lives?!
- As parents, we want the best for our children of course: But if we want our

children to live in a pluralistic democracy tomorrow, we should at least try to live by example and make deliberate choices for socially diverse schools (or at least sports clubs). And if we ended up choosing socially homogenous schools, we should better stop complaining about the lack of integration of others in society. We would be part of these "others"!

- Finally, I want to share with you a short exercise I practice regularly as part of my morning routine: I pick one of the top news of the day, mentally rotate through the various roles I play in society and simply notice how different my sensing, feeling and thinking is when these different parts of myself react to these news. I would say it helps me to remain a bit more fluid and versatile as a citizen... Try it out! ☺





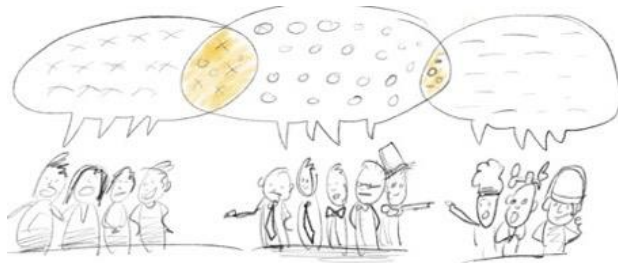
Remain curious and regularly interact with people who live a life dissimilar from your own!

Resist the temptation to use your own biography as a benchmark!

(1 November 2020)

Some more thoughts:

- It surprises me how many people believe that the friends, family & job circle around them would be “highly diverse”. Naturally, our individual perception of diversity is a function of our biographies. And since most of us have a built-in preference for similarity anyway, the path dependency of choices in life ultimately leads to filter bubbles and blind spots which may be conflicting with our cherished self-image. It probably needs more than the usual effort to create or preserve true diversity in our daily lives.



- In my “[Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter \(Part I\)](#)”, I quoted Friedrich Nietzsche with “the best way to corrupt young people is make them respect those who think alike more than those who think differently”. Let me add a second Nietzsche quote: “Convictions are prisons.”
- Honestly, I worry therefore that one of the underestimated, negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic could be the “Cocooning Danger” of a “Home Office Elite”: Easier excuses now for hiding at home or in exclusive private spaces and for avoiding public space in general.

- Unfortunately however, pluralistic and open societies require some form of “experiencing the other” if there shall be a minimum chance for creating compromises across political interests (I always liked “[Don Camillo and Peppone](#)” for that skill :-)).



- Therefore, try to stretch your comfort zone occasionally, disrupt your selection patterns and engage in meaningful conversations with strangers who you perceive as weird or unattractive for you at first glance. And don’t run away after two minutes!



Put yourself into the other's shoes: Always consider the possibility that the other could be right and that you could learn from him/her!

Be humble!

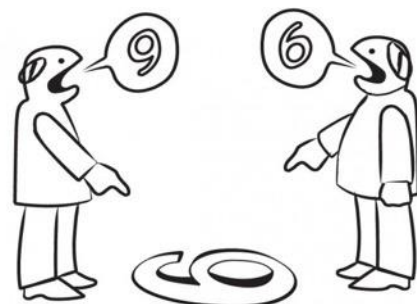
(3 November 2020)

Here are three suggestions – with two of them easier to implement than the third:

- Go to a **football pub** (when the state of COVID-19 allows) and openly defend the ref's decision against "your own" team. To me this is really one of the best citizen exercises for changing perspectives out there! ;-)
- Hop on a bus or a tramway and simply spend a few hours in a **neighbourhood where you would never buy a property!**



lives, but should naturally be in a very different social environment. This would not only strengthen citizen skills, but would certainly foster life-long learning to all intents and purposes.



And when you are nevertheless convinced that [all others are idiots](#), remember the old "Judgment Detox" rule at least: Notice more, judge less!

- The most important reason why exchange programmes abroad are a good thing is to experience yourself in another social setting and to question (and then maybe appreciate more) the social norms of your youth. How about a voluntary (or even compulsory) "citizen service" three times in life (be it for 12, for 6, or just for 3 months each)? For the age around 18, there have been political considerations for decades already. For around age 65, the discussion has recently started. Additionally, I would recommend a third "**citizen service**" around age **50**. For many reasons, such kind of community service could be physically close to where one



Question your own
assumed certainties,
majority narratives and
suspect popular outrage
of momentary zeitgeist!

(8 November 2020)

Let me start with reminding us of the „[confirmation bias](#)“ which we all know intellectually, but tend to overlook in daily life. Even more dangerous (and often underestimated) is „[groupthink](#)“. Both as member and facilitator of top teams, I have so often seen the well-researched symptoms of groupthink



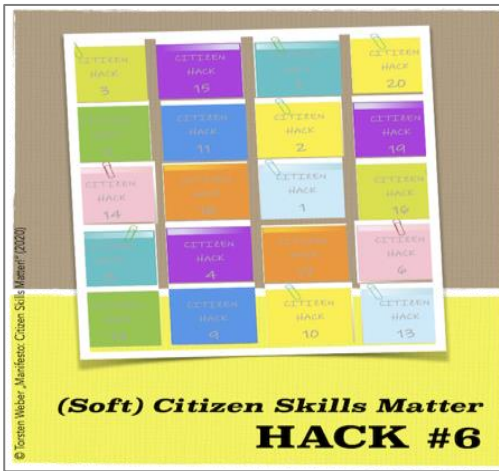
unfold: Self-censorship, illusion of invulnerability or unanimity, rationalising and stereotyping, etc. Even the best and most intelligent groups of experts are prone to “expert think” as it is called in this case! Pro-actively managing groupthink therefore remains a huge and untapped performance potential in many company boards and government cabinets. Anyway, which routines should we at least (in our role as citizens) establish when being members of groups? Here are just a few advice:

- When in a short span of time, 5 people tell you the very same interpretation of a complex matter, be suspicious! And even more so when it comes to pejorative narratives about scapegoats. This is where shitstorms often start – with us being unintentionally part of it. Some may ultimately lead to terrorism ([Samuel Paty](#) or [Walter Lübcke](#)), some have only become accepted cultural practices (e.g. football fan culture tolerating the insults to other clubs and their players).

- On (social) media competence: Always think before you click! The choice is in your fingers! Don’t just be a naïve victim of clickbaiting!
- Read news and expose yourself to opinions from very different sources. Especially other countries and other languages allow us to check national or cultural filters of perception and interpretation! I vividly remember a research paper I wrote in the early 1990s on the perception of Mikhail Gorbachev in the national media in Western European countries: Were they really talking about the very same person? Clearly, there were no fake news around and no masterminds pushing conspiracy theories. There were just (very different) popular narratives which seemed to work nicely in a certain environment.
- Dare being a court jester sometimes (which is more than just being a devil’s advocate) and challenge mainstream thinking even if the others around you adore the “[emperor’s new clothes](#)”. It’s a fine line to seeming stubborn, but take the risk whenever necessary!



- And there is an opportunity in these days: Talking to both camps on the extreme poles of the Covid-19 discussions is a perfect training ground. Go out and practice questioning your own certainties and narratives!



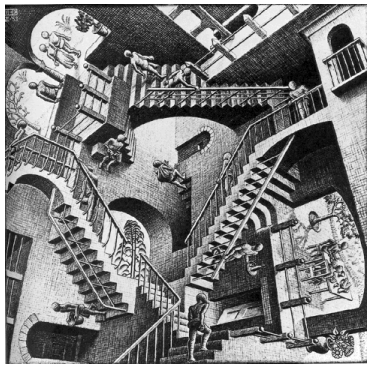
Be wary of the illusion of certainty and easy solutions for ethical dilemmas!

Learn to accept not-knowing, uncertainty, ambiguity! Be serene!

(14 November 2020)

When I was a young man, one of my life teachers left a piece of advice with me I only started to fully understand later in life: “Not-knowing, confusion, and helplessness are our best mentors!” Today, I am convinced that I could have never lived my purpose as a bridge and a facilitator without those dear mentors.

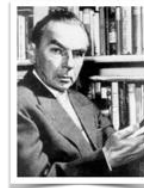
In his latest book „[This Too a History of Philosophy](#)“, the “Frankfurt School” philosopher Jürgen Habermas shares the interesting observation that never in the history there has been so much knowledge about



our not-knowing and that this would create “existential uncertainty”. I am wondering if existentially uncertain citizens compensate for that by being attracted to leaders displaying lots of over-decidedness and illusion of control. And by charging themselves with

moral self-authorisation in order to be able to denounce others who deal with uncertainty differently. Let me throw at you a couple of more background thoughts:

- Modern open societies cannot function with categorical imperatives only. With a Kantian absoluteness having returned (not only) to declared company values in the 21st century, I indeed want to campaign for strengthening the skill of making trade-offs. When some say in COVID times “opening schools is life-threatening” and others “not-opening schools is life-threatening”, insisting on moral superiority is obviously NOT a citizen skill.



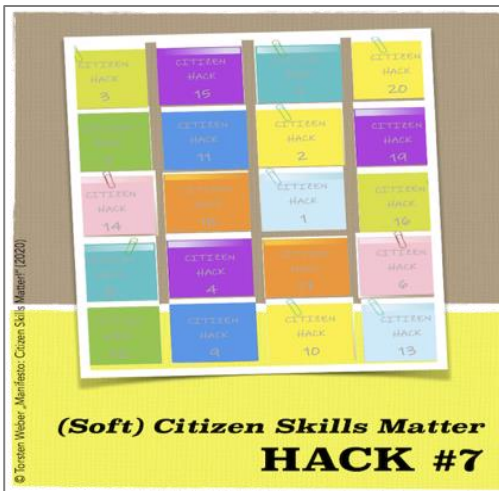
Wird's besser? Wird's schlimmer?
fragt man alljährlich.
Seien wir ehrlich:
Leben ist immer – lebensgefährlich!

Will it get better? Will it get worse?
You ask every year.
Let's be honest:
Life is always – life-threatening!

Erich Kästner (1899–1974)

- Undecidable decisions are at the core of ethics. No natural science (and not even artificial intelligence) can release us from taking conscious decisions in dilemma situations in adult life ourselves. Read more philosophy!
- Have the courage to actively manage risk! And this goes far beyond the narrow rationality concept with mathematical probabilities which has been the underlying assumption of the mainstream financial models in the last decades. One of the inter-disciplinary experts on “risk literacy”, [Gerd Gigerenzer](#), even relates it back to the mid-17th century “probabilistic revolution” with “the demise of the dream of certainty and the rise of a calculus of uncertainty” leading to probability theory. It sounds trivial but in order to feel psychologically safe we have to re-learn accepting not-knowing and uncertainty as such in the first place. Only then, we are ready to estimate risks!
- When it comes to ambiguity, it is worthwhile using the Tetralemma model which I briefly explained in part III of the “[Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter \(Part III\)](#)”. Train yourself to stand two opposing truths at the same time
- Take a break and notice what you have got! Be grateful to life!
- Be serene!





When you are overwhelmed by your own uncertainty and fear, pause and be resilient instead of attributing (often) false responsibility to scapegoats!

Notice more, judge less ("Judgement Detox")!

(16 November 2020)

In August 2020, when I had to choose an especially important "Citizen Hack" as a teaser at the end of my "[Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter \(Part IV\)](#)", I picked this one because "blaming others in order not to feel the pain" seemed to me particularly relevant for a world society in pandemic stress (also find the old text below again). Since then, mutual blaming has become even worse. I have therefore collected a couple of learnings we have had around fear and anxiety lately:

- Building on the „fight or flight“ terminology coined already in 1915 by the American physiologist, [Walter Cannon](#), "feigning death" as a third typical response mechanism when facing a threat has been added and explained by different scientific disciplines. Looking at Western societies in the last 10 years, feigning death has often taken the form of apathy, endless irony, cynicism, and "cocooning" lately.



- "Fear eats brain and then soul": We probably need to [be able to](#)

[differentiate better](#) between productive fear (commensurate to preventing us from taking unnecessary risk) und unhealthy, dysfunctional fear.

- "Stress is contagious!": The wider public didn't take notice when a [Max Planck study in 2014](#) showed that empathetic stress increased as a result of witnessing someone else in distress, whether they were a loved one or a total stranger.

- Since the COVID pandemic hit our reality in March 2020, I often think of Kurt von Hammerstein, the commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr when the Nazis seized power. In an [unorthodox biography](#), Hans Magnus Enzensberger, paraphrased Hammerstein's unusual mix of personality traits with "Angst is not a Weltanschauung". As a German myself, I certainly feel a responsibility to at least make head against German (and other) angst.

So, what can we do as citizens? Three little advice:

- "News hygiene for readers/viewers of news": Simply check news less often and be open then to notice some of the glasses half-full!
- "News hygiene for producers and multipliers of news": Develop new techniques how you can transparently inform WITHOUT creating fear at the same time!
- Being able to deal with your own fear and anxiety is an important citizen skill in an open society! History teaches us that whenever individual anxiety leads to societal anxiety, human and citizen rights are ultimately in danger. **So, as much as you wear masks to protect others from getting your (physical) virus, show solidarity and responsibility by not infecting others with your anxiety!**



Blaming others in order not to feel your pain

As I’m sure you’ve noticed, I have tried to ignore the COVID-19 situation in my manifesto. The risk of unknowingly using trigger words in an overly emotional public discourse is simply too high. Nevertheless, dealing with uncertainty and fear in the face of a pandemic currently teaches us a great lesson about life in general: When we all struggle, we strive to find a culprit for our misery and happily identify other human beings to take the blame. Let’s pause for a minute and work on our resilience: Who of us doesn’t make mistakes? Is the mistake really that bad? And is it really true that there was a mistake in the first place?



If we all had used these check questions when we heard about the [\(wrongly accused\) “American super-spreader in Garmisch”](#) instead of immediately asking for severe punishment, we wouldn’t have been able to conveniently redirect our attention and negative energies to someone else. I hope that in the future we won’t regress that easily to bad habits which remind us of times of witch hunt and mob law.

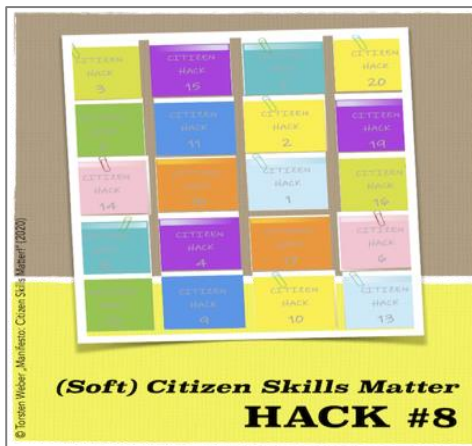
The E.U. as institutional scapegoat

National governments themselves regularly play a nasty “scapegoat game” with E.U. institutions when they claim E.U. successes for themselves and when they blame the E.U. for unpopular decisions – which is even more reprehensible when national governments themselves have actually lobbied for

those decisions behind the scenes. Let’s just imagine for a moment what would happen if more skilful citizens could unmask such unworthy behaviour and turn the tables: In such circumstances, what would prompt national politicians to act would not be opinion polls or clickbaiting of national tabloids, but skilled and well-informed citizens. The latter would have more realistic expectations towards democratic institutions which would then allow those institutions to transparently engineer better compromises (and decisions).

Of course, populists of all camps are unlikely to appreciate competent citizens: It’s like the scapegoat role of referees in modern football and how the video assistant referee (VAR) seems to be a threat for (too) many football fans to not have a readily available culprit to blame. The similarities between political populism and football fan culture are often painfully fascinating. Hence, stop shifting your own frustrations in life to politicians, to football referees, and to other human beings in general! Instead: Pause for a while before you act (or not)! Notice more, judge less!





Discover
the beauty
of compromises
and 80/20 solutions!

(20 November 2020)

Compromises are a core feature of democracy! Or more clearly: A democracy without compromises is unimaginable if we assume that human beings are not identical clones. And if there is diversity in personalities, preferences, interests, etc., bringing all of them in balance is time-consuming, often emotional and always full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity (VUCA). This is why training our [VUCA skills](#) also makes us better citizens!

I have been raised with valuing compromises as

something positive ("it is better than going to war or in an escalation spiral") and to esteem those who make them possible. Therefore, I am regularly surprised and

sometimes even appalled when I hear the standard narratives in the morning news e.g. after an EU summit: Words like "crisis" and "chaos" and a disrespectful tonality towards those who have negotiated the two nights before. Please excuse my infuriation:

- Any dog breeder club with 7 members has a good fight when trying to allocate the cost for a newly purchased club device. And sometimes this even results in a little ice age in that village.
- At an EU summit, there are 27 parties. You don't have to be brilliant in maths to realise the exponential complexity of such a large-group negotiation.

- And this is not it yet: 27 coalition partners in multi-party governments, 27 opposition parties, and 27 national media landscapes with diverse sub-groups actively try to

maximise their own particular interests and influence public opinion. Some of those stakeholders might even have good reasons to torpedo or even sabotage a compromise.

- Media stakeholders may just have a preference for bad news which sell. And in a social media world with "shitstorm spirals", their dysfunctional impact on running negotiations is obvious.
- So what the heck do people expect!!! EU summits and the likes are most difficult undertakings!!

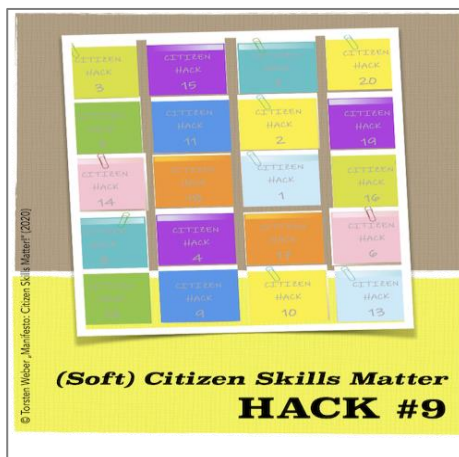
To me, compromises can be pieces of (social) art interwoven with the grace of ambiguity. I do understand the attractiveness of "either or clarity", but such thing just doesn't exist. So, stop expecting it! Of course, I am biased with me being a facilitator in international politics and business myself... and yeah, maybe this is why I am writing all this.



So, what do I recommend:

- Have more realistic expectations towards challenging negotiations in a complex world!
- Compromises are always intermediate, full of mistakes and ready to be improved and re-negotiated soon later. Hence, their sheer nature is agile! Therefore, celebrate compromises, recognise small steps and – why not – value the negotiators!
- Something practical: When trying to negotiate a challenging breakthrough deal, limit the number of participants to an absolute minimum, close the door, switch off the Wi-Fi or even set up a Faraday cage (tweeting during a negotiation or critical workshop to prove that you are a tech innovator is simply not cool!) and run it almost like a papal election!





Train your positive thinking
and be kind
with others and yourself!

(22 November 2020)

This hack is actually quite self-explanatory. When you discuss it over a dinner table, nobody would seriously question that continuous negativity makes us sick. On the other hand, happiness, satisfaction and true positivity seem to make suspicious. Both in many organisations and in society, they are often interpreted as a lack of willingness to perform and “go the extra mile”. How often have I heard variations of “you look unstressed and seem to be happy... don’t you have anything to do?” Although there have been regularly recurring waves of discussions around [“Salutogenesis”](#) and a more holistic perspective on health and wellbeing since the 1980s, they have been largely hidden behind the dominant narrative that life is ultimately about (superficial) success, status climbing and an “always-on functionality with a false smile”.



In 1993, when I was a public policy making student in Washington, D.C., “pessimism is no policy” was still an iconic slogan after the dull Reagan/Bush years. It must have been soon later that some kind of

negativity virus has started to gradually infect society with – what I would call - a “spot the mistake” attitude.

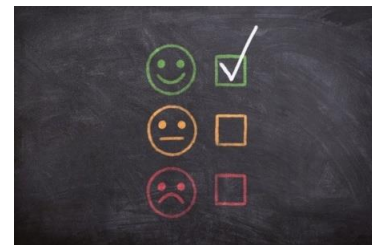
Let me share with you an empirical “mini test”. It is only anecdotal and comprises only one single observation point in each of the last 3 years, but it should be enough to make my point: It is the first hot day of the year. All (online) newspapers ask their science journalists to (re-)publish the annual list of advice what one should do in order to avoid sunburns and sunstrokes.

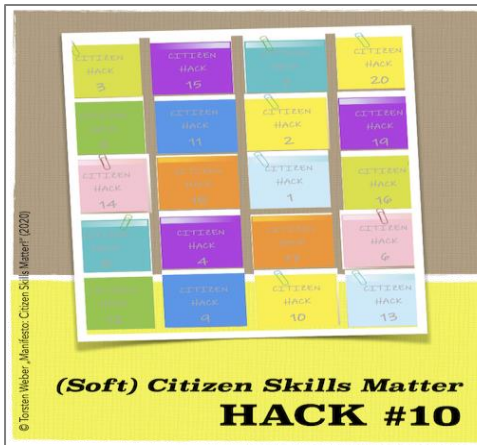
When those articles were published, I simply counted how many of the first 100 comments below the article were negative: It was more than 80 in

average every year in every journal! Remember: This is not about politics and not about sports, it is just a piece of advice grandmothers would have given in earlier times. “Now, THEY already want to dictate us what we shall do on a sunny day” is a typical comment. Plus those many other comments reacting to all possible trigger words that could accidentally or willingly be misunderstood. Obviously, we are pretty good in spotting mistakes.

So, what can we do:

- Make it a habit (just for yourself) to immediately see the positive when something seemingly negative happens to you (and what you cannot change anymore). It was a tough test for myself when recently my beloved coat was stolen during a train ride. I was about to fume at my misfortune, when I quickly forced myself to see it as a helpful way to get rid of property even more than already before. Believe me, it worked. I have never again spent any energy on that loss.
- Try to overcome your own tendency to „spot the mistake“! E.g. make it a standard rule in (management) meetings to always point out first what you liked in a presentation before you add your suggestions for how to improve it. As a facilitator of board meetings, I often have to work hard to allow for that to happen.
- Strengthen your “positivity muscle” wherever you can: Practice being in favour of and not against something!





Actively share
success stories
and other good news!

Compliment others
more often – also strangers
in the public space!

(25 November 2020)

Building on the last hack on [positive thinking](#), let me share with you a recent observation:

- As part of the German „November Lockdown Lite“ measures, outdoor team sports were generally prohibited. A few days later, one state allowed (among other things) outdoor tennis with 2 players again. The headline in the evening news was “Chaotic measures confuse people!”. The following report included 3 soundbites from tennis club officials and players which conveyed happiness and satisfaction with the rapid and agile fine-tuning by the authorities. Unlike what the headline implied, for them and also for me as an observer, this was a success story of learning and agility.

Of course, we intellectually understand that bad news are good news, but we also sense deep inside that we are part of that “clickbaiting mechanism” ourselves. So, what can we do to disrupt our own patterns:

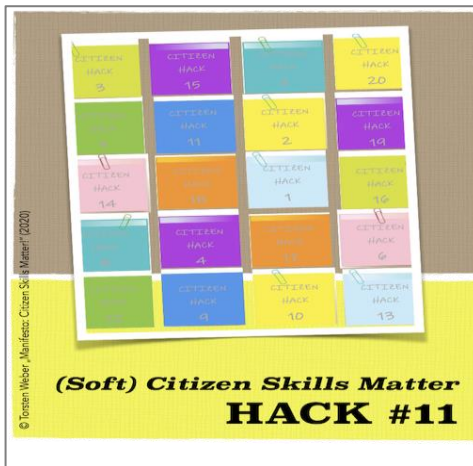


- Discipline yourself to actively share also good news and success stories – online and when talking to others (rule of thumb: at least one “good” for one “bad” story)!



- Pay for good journalism! If selling doesn’t need to happen through sensationalist headlines, editors do not have to appeal to primitive instincts. Maybe they would separate factual report and opinion more clearly again, show more courage to give more room to minority perspectives beyond zeitgeist, experiment with more “solution-centred” talk show formats, and much more.
- Support those who [spread the “positive” word](#)! And if you want to immunise yourself against the negativity mainstream narratives and equip yourself with helpful data (and charismatic motivation), check out (again) the abundant work of [Hans and Ola Rosling](#) which has already become a classic.





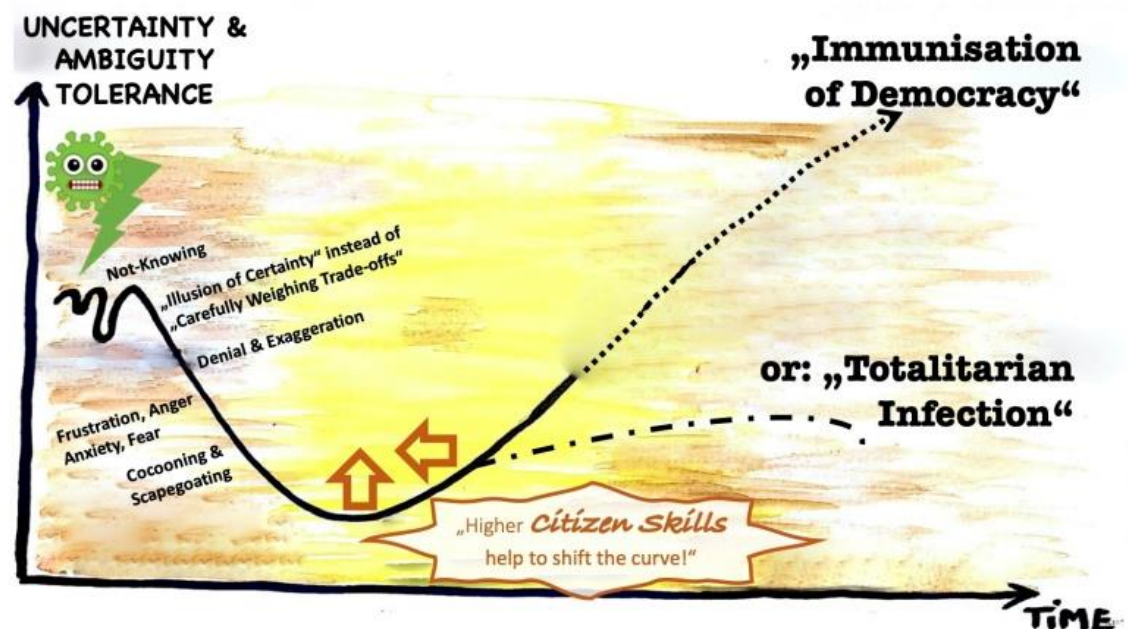
Remember the basics of societal change processes and how to deal with resistance wisely!

(29 November 2020)

The COVID pandemic hit Europe exactly 23 years after I became a change manager at Lufthansa. It's time for a learning loop! No, not about the state of the airline industry today or how I would analyse Lufthansa's evolution since 1997 with an outside view. This would be another story... ;-)

As one of those early change pioneers who were experimenting with non-linear transformation models, agile facilitation, holacracy and all that stuff back then, I am wondering whether we as citizens have gained a "meta change competence" as well in all those years or if we have rather lost it. In the beginning of the ["Manifesto: Citizen Skills Matter \(Part I\)"](#), I claimed that (new) consumerism and (old) nepotism have kept us busy with ourselves ("My car and my family first!") leaving no room for taking social responsibility beyond our own obvious interests. However, democracies need citizens who are capable and willing to put themselves into the shoes of dissimilar groups in a pluralistic and interdependent society, to think a few steps ahead, and to act within this society with a holistic attitude and literacy in systemic thinking. So this time, rather than giving concrete advice, I would like to share with you only a few reminders how to possibly look at our society as a change manager:

- Don't forget the old change curve: Even in my engineering-driven home country, societal change does NOT follow linear functions! Change needs time. Nobody likes change. Change makes things often worse before they might become better. Etc. Etc. Very basic knowledge, but nonetheless

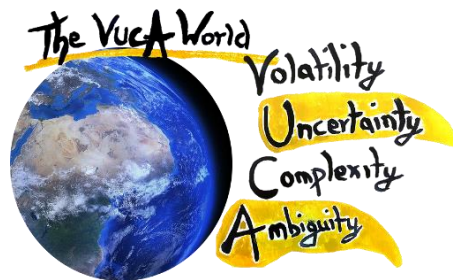


helpful when we want to manage our (mutual) expectations (not only) in a crisis.

- Only 15% of an intended strategy will ultimately be found in real life later. This disillusioning empirical evidence for organisations is well-researched - and this "strategy conversion rate" will most likely be even worse for entire (and more complex) societies.
- Public opinion is volatile. Seemingly little incidents can be tipping points for major shifts.
- Resistance is information which can be utilised for continuous improvement. And:

Pushing back resistance unnecessarily creates more of it.

- Uncertainty and ambiguity avoidance is human, yet we shouldn't fall in the trap of giving the illusion that simple rules will



do it. Often [A and B can be true at the same time!](#)

- A rule which doesn't allow for exceptions is not a good rule, it's a dogma. Or to put it differently: Rules which are only followed when they are severely controlled and punished are not good rules. Just as one example out of many: Trying to enforce something like solidarity with the means of executive measures has never worked and is – sorry to be so blunt – simply stupid or at best naïve ("well-intended is not yet well-done").
- Daring to trust other members of society is a change challenge itself. Like a "control freaky" CEO who asks for personal coaching when attempting a new leadership style with more trust, we all need to take the conscious risk of an investment into trusting (us and others).

Just as food for thought when we start or continue co-creating our society with other citizens. :-)