

All pictures by the author

Locked Down Observations from the Balcony

Published on April 6, 2020



Ernst von Kimakowitz
Passionate About Strengthening the Positive Impact of Business

Following depictions from action sci-fi movies, Covid-19 should make us all turn against each other, stockpiling non-perishable foods, barricading our homes after hiding some gold or silver coins in a safe place, storing multiple first aid kits and several years' supply of basic medicines, filling up our cars and a few extra canisters with gas and seriously considering getting armed while we have a suitcase packed, ready to run when life in the city becomes too dangerous. But what I observe during lockdown from our balcony is, by and large, quite the opposite.



Stripped of our high paced busyness we see more clearly some of the things that matter most to us.

My wife and I live in Geneva, Switzerland, and for the past two weeks, every evening at 9pm the citizen gather on their balconies and windows to make some noise and applaud the key workers that are keeping our city running. Neighbors wave and smile at each other across the street, encouraging words are exchanged at a distance and help offered to those who can or should not go food shopping themselves. Sometimes one of the neighbors turns up her stereo and, isolated but together, we listen to her choice of feel-good tunes while, on occasion, an instrument is played. Then I watch an entirely empty tram passing on the main street one block up from our balcony which is running to schedule even if I have not seen more than two or three people on any of them for a fortnight. It is a surreal but also a most humane experience as stripped of the high paced busyness of our normal lives we may see more clearly some of the things that matter most to us.



***Both, showing appreciation for others
and being grateful oneself has rock
solid benefits for our mental and
physical health***

We thrive on positive feedback and genuine appreciation for our work and we have a desire to express gratitude. Positive feedback and appreciation allows us to see purpose in our work or other activities for it is confirmation that what we do adds value to something that is bigger than ourselves. In turn this makes us more motivated, more engaged, more confident and more productive in what we do. Gratitude on the other hand is also highly beneficial for those who show it as grateful people tend to land on their feet. Gratitude allows us to embrace more positive sentiments and better handle adversity while it helps us build strong relationships. Grateful people recover more quickly from unfortunate events in life while they are also healthier and more empathetic, which by the way is one of the most undervalued leadership skills. It is not hard to see that applauding our key workers stands for much more than just a friendly gesture.



I am because you are

We are social beings, we seek personal interaction. Even if it is only a smile and wave across the street, research has long established that it has a positive effect on our physical and mental well-being. It lowers anxiety and stress and helps prevent depression as we train our communicative skills and sharpen our ability to express ourselves with clarity. We are also willing and wanting to help others not only because we expect help ourselves should we need it; not only because it is good for our careers and good for business. Neuroscience provides clear evidence that helping others makes us happier and live longer, supports us in being more resilient and is a strong driver for finding meaning in life. Social interaction gives us a more positive outlook on life while it even boosts our immune system. In short, we need each other to live healthy and fulfilled lives. To give one out of many examples for how our sociality is deeply ingrained in our acting, thinking and being we can look at African Ubuntu practical philosophy of which the key message is: "I am because you are".



We want a capable state, able and equipped to overrule economic rationality if need be.

The last observation from my balcony is that we should want a capable state equipped with the resources to overrule economic rationality when something higher is at stake. Clearly, it does not make economic sense to have trams with two, three, five or no passengers at all running to schedule without at least strongly reducing their frequency. But many of the key workers we so urgently need to keep basic services running in the city depend on public transport to get to work and deliver an invaluable service and to get back home again after. The last thing they currently need and the last thing we currently want is crowded public transport putting at risk the health of those people we very much depend on.

What will it take to bring some of those insights back to our offices post Covid-19?

None of this is new or radical and yet it seems that very little of it are we able to practice in organizations in which we are constantly firefighting, benchmarking, dealclosing, competing, ranking, targeting, conquering. So what will it take to bring some of these insights back to our offices once we are powering up operations and opening up for business again?

Ernst von Kimakowitz is passionate about strengthening the positive impact of business towards a more equitable and more sustainable planet. He is founding director of the [Humanistic Management Center](#) and co-founder of the [Humanistic Management Network](#). He holds a research position at the [University of Lucerne](#) and leads the executive training provider [Ethics First](#). Ernst is also a lecturer at the [University of St. Gallen](#) and held visiting faculty positions in Colombia, Germany, India, and Japan.

