

What Snow White teaches us about communication

Once upon a time, there was a CEO. He had to steer his company safely through a world of threatening competitors and ensure its long-term survival. He was responsible for product development as well as all administrative and financial matters. Pause for a moment. What kind of company do you picture in your mind?

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Did you think of a bank or an insurance company? Or a mid-sized industrial firm with around 300 employees?

Not at all! I was talking about myself – a sole trader who covers all tasks personally and uses external services only where needed.

Without this frame of reference, my opening communication probably led you astray. And that is precisely what many people neglect when they talk about their own experience: context.

A CFO is not just a CFO

An example. Years ago, I was coaching a CFO for a job interview. From his CV, I could see his role and main responsibilities. I did not know the company. I told him what I pictured in my mind: “You work for a manufacturing company with around 250 employees, selling its products domestically and in neighbouring countries.”

Horried, he replied: “We employ over 2,500 people, have subsidiaries on three continents, and export to more than 50 countries!” Ouch! According to Daniel Kahneman’s availability heuristic (see book tip below), I underestimated what I did not know and therefore did not have readily in mind.

So, pay close attention to providing context throughout your entire application

communication. In your CV, briefly describe the company if it is not widely known.

In the job interview, too, start with the context by first describing the company and your role. Only then move on to your responsibilities – as I outlined in my article “Psycho for the job interview”.

Snow White’s dance

This logic can be illustrated with a principle from classic animated films. There were two types of artists: character animators, responsible for action, dynamics and the personality of the protagonists – the foreground. And background artists, responsible for depth, light and atmosphere – the context.

The former brought Snow White to life. They drew her coyly lifting her skirt and performing a cheerful little dance while singing. Yet it made a difference which context the background artists placed her in. Is she dancing in the forest, fluttered around by birds and butterflies, while deer watch her wide-eyed and little rabbits cheerfully tap the beat?

Or is she dancing on tables in the saloon of a gold-mining town, watched with greedy eyes by an exclusively male audience, who pound the rhythm on the tables with their boots?

For the age rating board, it was probably not the character, but the context, that made all the difference.

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