

Professor Olaf Hauer: «I am trying to embody what I teach students"»



Everybody, including students, calls professor Hauer by his first name. That is not because they confuse liberalism with cronyism. Actually, professor Olaf is not only a mentor, but a friend who always tries to support his students and to be a communication partner.

Olaf Hauer, international master coach, defended his PhD theses in Friedrich Schiller University Jena (Germany) and has worked for BMW Corporation for 17 years. Today he has been a visiting professor for master's students at the Institute of Industrial Economics and Management, SPbPU, he teaches International Personnel Management and Communication Leadership. Professor Hauer is convinced that his coming to the Polytechnic University was not an accident. In the interview to SPbPU Media Center correspondent Olaf Hauer talked about the "master coach" profession, his experience of working for the BMW company and about his requirements for Polytechnic students at exams.

**- Olaf, you gained your university degree in Leningrad. Why did you decide to study in the Soviet Union?**

- I came from East Germany, I was born in the German Democratic Republic. At the time social, political and cultural relations between the USSR and GDR were very close. After passing my exams in the 10th form (the school period was 12 years) I was offered to go to study in the Soviet Union. From then on, I started my preparation for the study in the USSR. I took it for granted.

When I went to school, I did not know what profession to choose. I liked medicine, but thought I was not cut out for this. However, at the specialized school where we were prepared for the studies in the USSR, we had a career orientation lecture of the person who had graduated from the Psychological Department of Leningrad State University. I was so impressed by this lecture and psychology as a subject that the choice of the profession was predetermined. As my teachers said, while medicine could be studied in other socialist countries - Bulgaria, Poland etc., psychology was a priority of the USSR, it had the best school.

**- First of all, could you explain what a coach is? What are his main goals and objectives?**

- According to the classical definition, "coach" is a person who contributes to the professional and personality growth of another person, or a customer. A coach will help a customer analyze any significant life or a professional situation, in which he finds himself, define problems hard to solve. The main thing is to encourage a person to find his/her own solution to the current problems.



A coach does everything through asking questions; he explicitly refrains from advising. A coach should accept his/ her client, find an approach to him/ her and ask questions which the client has never asked to himself/ herself. Obviously, answers to the questions are those the client has never got. Asking questions, a coach can use a variety of models or approaches to coaching and Q&A algorithm, such as GROW or TURBO2.

I would say that a coach is a person who contributes to development of another person at a certain stage of life.

**- You are an international master coach. How have you gained this status?**

- After my graduation in Leningrad I returned back to my country and got a job of a research assistant in the Institute of Psychology, Friedrich Schiller University of Jena. There I kept studying social psychology, wrote my research theses, and after gaining the qualification, I started working as a coach for the program "Talking in conflict partnership situations". This area is very interesting to me, as in order to achieve effective communication, to reach a certain result and to maintain a favorable climate of relationships, it is necessary to follow certain rules and to apply certain techniques. Using these techniques dozens of times, you acquire skills which become part of your life. During the training on talking in conflict partnership situations participants learn to behave more constructively, to be orientated towards the cooperation, rather than rivalry. This has a positive impact

on the joint work as a whole, in a variety of fields and circumstances.



After I had defended my theses, - that time I was a certified coach, - BMW car manufacturing company invited me as a coach to develop an auto dealer network. In the beginning, I worked in Germany, but as I know the Russian language, I also started working in Russia's region. Then BMW's management offered me a job in China; instead of the initial period of 7-8 months, I stayed there four years. In China I had diverse responsibilities, from selecting Chinese specialists for complex long-term projects, for developing dealerships, to organizing working processes and corporate culture. Later I was in charge of professional development of the selected specialists. As they were expected to become coaches, I was called a master coach; as everything took place in a different country and everybody communicated in English, I gained a status of international master coach.

**- You worked for the world corporation from 1992 to 2009. What did you receive from this experience?**

- Of course, a 17-year experience can give much. For a start, I would like to say a couple of words about the BMW corporation. This is an advanced company in terms of new technologies and their launch into production. It takes a risk of implementing the things that other manufacturers even cannot imagine. The corporation's managers always search for optimal solutions, doing their best and demanding the best from their staff.

What did the BMW company give me? These are self-discipline, inaccessibility of half-solutions, I would say, hate for such solutions; responsibility for all the work. I share the company's philosophy that professionalism and high quality should be shown at every levels, generally and in detail.

**- As a visiting professor of the Polytechnic University, do you impose strict requirements on students?**

- Not now, but I will. I started to work in the Polytech in October, therefore I have participated in exams only twice and have been quite lenient, because this is my first examiner's experience. I have made conclusions, and next time I will assess student knowledge according to criteria and their answers to a list of obligatory questions. I will assess students' answers, including answers to additional questions, by their accuracy and comprehensiveness.

In my opinion, the most effective is the following educational model: lecturing, then student independent written work, teacher's feedback on this written work, then a student corrects his/ her work according to the feedback; later students present their results to each other and receive feedback from the teacher and fellow students; in the end, students exchange the knowledge and write a final one-or-two-page paper, which is the outcome of the lecture course.

Students should be able to use theoretical models to analyze and to solve real problems, with the above-stated outcome helping them work out their own

approach to analyzing problems, structuring results and drawing conclusions.

**- Which courses do you deliver to Polytechnic students?**

- I deliver 5-6-day intensive courses in International HR Management, Personal Skills and Communicative Leadership, Organizational Theory and Organizational Behavior for Master's degree students of the Institute of Industrial Management and Economics. The course of Personal Skills and Communicative Leadership is an experimental one, its format is a little unusual: every day after classes students have to make intermediate results and to define what they will keep doing, what they will reject and what they will start in terms of various communication techniques - active listening, anger management, constructive argumentation etc. I also like the course of Organizational Theory and Organizational Behavior where I explain to students that the human behavior is different at work and at home, and whether it is normal or not. Moreover, we will consider the correlation between corporate culture and daily behavior of the staff, how it is possible to change the corporate culture through the deliberate change in the staff behavior.

**- You interact both with top managers of major companies and students. Are there any similarities between the two audiences?**

- I like working with both experienced managers and young people. Recently, I have worked more with top managers, who are outstanding, clever, courageous and mature people, they can defend their opinion. Students, being young, do not have such an ability, therefore, I had to review my approach to work, create conditions to develop logical and critical thinking in young people. But thinking patterns, perception of information, response to information, reflecting on the received information, readiness for action - these processes are similar even in such different audiences.

**- What are the students of the Polytechnic University?**

- Apart from their behavior in the canteen, when they are hungry and rush their way through the crowd, - but it is common all over the world (laughing) - they are pleasant to deal with. It is hard for me to talk about all the students, but the students of the Polytechnic University I worked with are open-minded, willing to perceive information, to use the communication models I show them in everyday life. They also broaden their horizons in theoretical and practical aspects; they ask a lot of questions, we have discussions. I try to be a role model for students, to embody what I teach them. I think they understand and accept this.





As I teach courses within the Master's degree programs, most of my students are foreigners, I enjoy teaching them. They were brave to leave their countries, though temporarily, to experience a new life, a new language. This proves their ambitions and maturity. I was the same when I had arrived in the USSR to study. These memories are still vivid. When you have to buy sugar, but you do not a Russian word for "sugar", and you have to drink tea without sugar, realizing you are not able to explain elementary things. You feel like a child abandoned in a desert, who has to do his best to find water in order to survive. Then you do understand that it was your decision to go to the "desert". Such thoughts and feelings result into a new level of experience, a new vision of yourself, life around you and your country. All this can lead to a new level of needs, brand-new ideas and plans for future. That is why I am trying to support students and to be a speaking partner for them.

**- What do you mean?**

- I will give you several examples. Firstly, I occasionally ask students what they will be doing after graduation: whether they will start their own business or they will be employed by a company, in what country etc. Asking them such serious questions, I urge them to think over serious answers, hereby setting serious goals.

Secondly, I spent my previous vacation in Costa Rica, and one of my students was from this region. He was just at home and invited me to his place. We talked a lot about everything, but mostly about the life and study in Russia. I shared my

experience in that country. After that he told me that he had acquired a new vision.

Thirdly, as I mentioned, I teach both Russian and international students. During classes, when students have to work in teams, I form international teams, teach them how to analyze and to understand a different culture and its people. Very often most students miss a unique chance to take advantage of the international education when they could learn different cultures without going abroad. It is beyond my understanding how it is possible to study with a student from Brazil and to be ignorant of the language spoken in Brazil, national food, traditions, how many kisses are given at the meeting in Brazil - these are essential things! Ignorance of cross-cultural differences in the international or global environment can be detrimental for constructive communication and cooperation. You can be trapped without knowing that. E.g. in India, you cannot give money change with a right hand, if you do so, an Indian will be offended. Therefore, it is better to learn all cultural peculiarities in advance, by communicating with fellow students from different countries.

**- Why do you find important to teach effective communication skills to engineering students?**

- Your University prepares engineering specialists who often know little about various tactics, techniques and skills of effective communication. Without this knowledge, students, whatever professionals they are, will face difficulties in communicating with people from other business divisions, because every person keeps his own culture, his own system of attitudes and values.

I follow the EPIC concept - every problem involves communication. If a problem arises due to communication, this problem can be solved also through changing communication. 70-80% of problems can be solved through correct communication.

In my opinion, the Polytechnic University urgently needs such fields as management and marketing, including my courses, in order to prepare highly qualified specialists. When I work with top managers of major companies in terms of forming teams and developing organizations, I face the same problems in communication. But these problems can be avoided if students at university will study not only engineering subjects, but skills of effective communication.

**- Olaf, you have been teaching in the Polytechnic University for six months. At the end of our talk could you share the impressions of our University? Do you have any wishes to the University?**

- First of all, I would like to say that my arrival at the Polytech was not accidental. 33 years ago I knew that Leningrad Polytechnic Institute was a strong and excellent university. I always had a good time with students from GDR, who studied in LPI and were extremely proud of that fact. When I received an invitation to become a visiting professor at your university, I took it as something natural. When I got to know the University better, I revealed here a very close link between

theory and practice in all the fields of research, with globally important breakthroughs developed. Later I realized that the Polytech was the place where I was eager to be. Obviously, it is one of the best Russian universities, and I am ready to make a contribution into its further development to help the Polytech join the five Russian universities which will be on the list of 100 top universities in the world by 2020. I strongly believe that the Polytechnic University will achieve this goal!

**- Olaf, thank you for these kind words and the interesting talk!**

Media Center, SPbPU

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