

Turnaround is not a Talking Circle: Why Real Change Needs Real Experience

By Prof. Dr. Sven David



1. Introduction: The Rise of "Soft" Turnaround

In recent years, a wave of new leadership formats has emerged in response to the changing landscape of business management. Coaching sessions, reflective circles, executive peer dialogues—all these formats have gained traction, particularly in



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cultures where harmony, introspection, and emotional intelligence are rightly valued. These approaches have their merits. They can foster awareness, clarity, and alignment. They can create moments of insight that help individuals understand their roles more deeply.

However, somewhere along the way, the distinction between emotional insight and organizational action has become blurred. Increasingly, the language of transformation—words like "turnaround," "restructuring," and "reset"—is being applied to formats that may support personal development but fall short in guiding companies through existential crises.

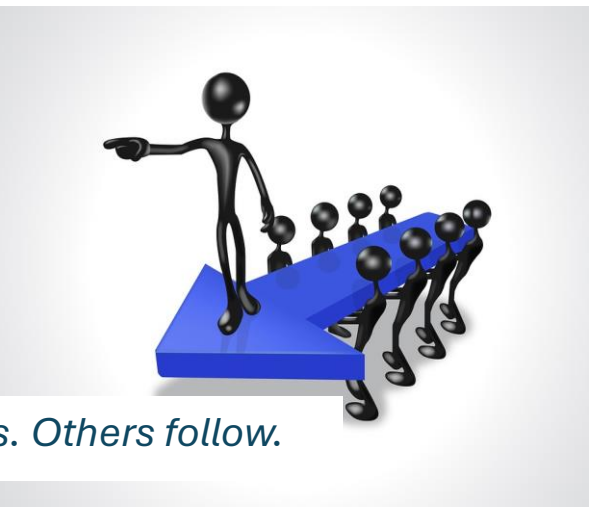
This article seeks to re-establish that distinction. A real turnaround is not a conversation. It is not a consensus-building process. It is not a safe space for collective reflection. It is, fundamentally, a discipline. It is a practiced craft honed by experience, forged in the fires of real crises. It is a field where only those who have steered through storms truly understand the nature of the winds.



2. Turnaround Is a High-Stakes Operation, Not a Wellness Retreat

Let us consider a simple analogy. Imagine a commercial airplane in flight. Suddenly, there is turbulence. One engine fails. Panic sets in. The cabin crew looks to the cockpit for direction. Now picture the pilot turning around and saying, "Let's take a moment to explore how we all feel about this. Let's hear from everyone before we decide our next move."

Of course, such a scenario is absurd. In high-stakes situations, leadership must be decisive. The leader must rely on experience, training, and cold, hard facts. Emotions matter, yes, but they must be processed after, not during, critical interventions.



In crisis, one leads. Others follow.

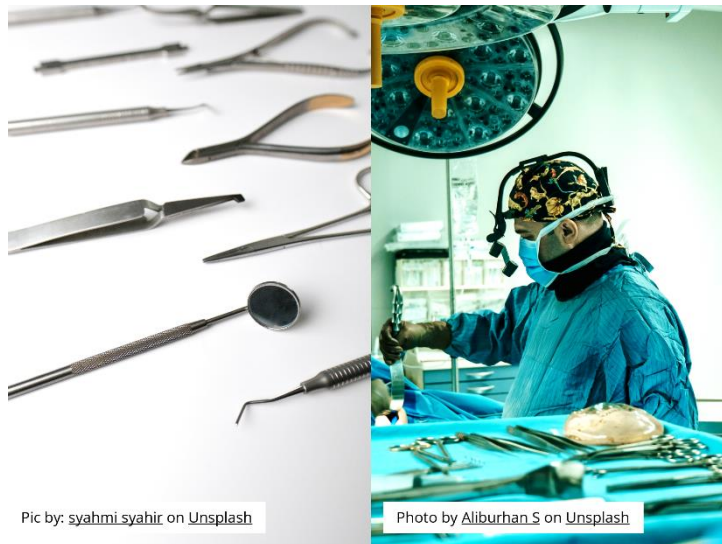
A corporate turnaround is no different. It is not a space for exploration; it is a domain for execution. The company is bleeding cash. Its markets may be eroding. Investors are losing confidence. Employees are uncertain. Every moment counts. Decisions must be made quickly, grounded in data, and implemented with discipline. The kind of leadership needed in such moments is not about personal insight; it is about strategic acuity and operational rigor.



3. What Real Turnaround Requires

Real turnaround requires a particular mindset—and a very specific toolkit. It begins with the ability to diagnose accurately, which is more than just reviewing financial statements. It means understanding patterns across industries, reading between the lines of cash flow trends, and recognizing signs of organizational fatigue. It means knowing what questions to ask and, just as importantly, knowing when silence is revealing.

It also involves making painful decisions. Sometimes, parts of the business must be shut down. Sometimes, loyal employees must be let go. Sometimes, cherished products or services must be abandoned. These decisions cannot be outsourced to group discussions. They must be made by those who understand the entire picture and are willing to take responsibility for difficult calls.



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A true turnaround professional does not flinch in the face of conflict. They manage stakeholders with competing interests—banks, suppliers, unions, board members—without losing focus. They understand not only the financials but also the psychology of uncertainty. They do not merely direct change; they embody it, providing a steady presence amid chaos.



4. The Role of Coaching and Dialogue—Useful, But Not the Core

To be clear: coaching, dialogue, and emotional support are not irrelevant. On the contrary, they can play a crucial supporting role in the process of corporate recovery. Once the bleeding has been stopped, once the new direction has been set, and once the key decisions have been executed—then these tools can help a leadership team reorient itself. They can build resilience. They can support communication and cohesion. They can ensure that the human side of the equation is not lost in the technical complexity.

But they are not the foundation. They are not the drivers. If we treat them as such, we risk confusing the nature of the task. We may feel better—momentarily—but we may lose the company.



5. Integration, Not Substitution: A Stronger Approach

The ideal path forward is not to dismiss soft tools, but to integrate them intelligently. Imagine a team in which a crisis-hardened strategist partners with a skilled coach. The strategist sets the roadmap, prioritizes interventions, and communicates transparently with stakeholders. Meanwhile, the coach helps leaders stay grounded, aligned, and emotionally fit to lead others.

This model is not only more holistic – it is more effective.

It acknowledges that people are not machines, and that emotion is part of every organizational system. But it also acknowledges that emotion must serve action, not delay it.



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In Southeast Asia, where social harmony is deeply valued, this approach can be especially powerful. It respects cultural values while ensuring organizational survival.



6. What Clients Deserve in a Real Turnaround

Clients facing existential challenges need more than emotional support. They need assurance. They need to know that the people advising them have done this before—and succeeded. They need to see clear plans, measurable milestones, and experienced leadership.

They deserve:

1. Liquidity plans that prevent insolvency
2. Restructuring roadmaps based on facts, not hopes
3. Credible communication with banks and investors
4. Protection from legal and reputational damage
5. A team that does not panic under pressure

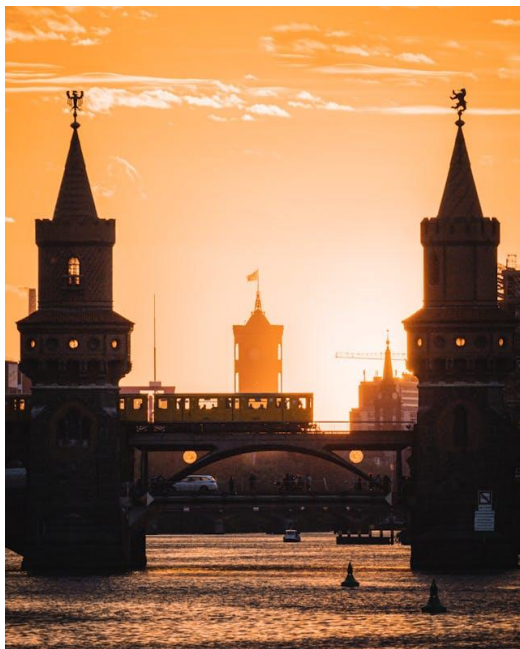


These outcomes do not come from insight circles. They come from execution. And execution is led by those who have done it many times before.



7. A Respectful Invitation to Collaborate

To those in the coaching and leadership development space: you play a vital role. Your work supports the emotional stamina that any transformation requires. But I invite you



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to consider something more powerful than operating alone. Consider forming alliances with those who can deliver the structural change your clients need.

And to clients: ask not just who listens well, but who has rebuilt companies. Look for those with scars, because they know where the dangers are. Seek partnerships that combine empathy with rigor, care with clarity, and insight with execution.

The future of turnaround is not about choosing between soft and hard—it is about building bridges. Let us meet in the middle and do the real work.



Author's Note:

Over the past 25 years, I have been involved in more than 40 turnaround projects across sectors and continents. I have worked with great coaches—and also seen what happens when structural work is neglected in favor of dialogue alone. I believe in balance. And I believe in results. If you're ready to raise the bar on what turnaround truly requires, I am open to partnership.

Let's build something that lasts.