

**FINANCIAL TIMES**

**March 5, 2021**



## **Life & Arts**

# The CEO whisperer: ‘Every leader needs a fool’

Management thinker Manfred Kets de Vries on the secrets of staying grounded at the top

March 5, 2021 12:30 pm by **Michael Skapinker**

“Everybody is normal until you know them better,” Manfred Kets de Vries tells me. As a leading explorer of top executives’ psyches, Kets de Vries has, for decades, had a close-up view of what drives those at the top, and what dark thoughts lurk behind their domineering facades.

The 78-year-old professor has written more than 50 books and 400 articles and book chapters, many of them examining leaders’ narcissism, how they are affected by their early relationships, and what that does to their communication — or lack of it — with their loved ones and staff. I observe that not many people

have, as he puts it in his most recent book, combined John Maynard Keynes's "dismal science" with Sigmund Freud's "impossible profession".

"Not many people are as crazy," he says. While trained in classical psychoanalysis, along with a Harvard MBA and doctorate, he says that when it comes to encouraging self-reflection in his top-executive students, "I do anything that works. I'm not a holy man."

We are talking over video from our kitchens, mine in north London, his up a mountain outside Grasse. He has chosen to sit out the coronavirus pandemic in his farmhouse there, finding it a more congenial base than his Paris apartment.

This is not to be one of those Zoom lunches where the two sides order a takeaway. In an email the week before, Kets de Vries tells me that he will be having a four-course meal, partly cooked by his Swedish wife, Elisabet Engellau, his co-teacher at the Fontainebleau-based business school Insead and "somewhat of a two-star Michelin cook", supplemented by specialities from nearby Cannes. I have, in my kitchen, tried to match Engellau's efforts, in quantity if not in skill.

Both our kitchens are gleaming with winter sunlight. He introduces me to two wines he will be drinking. He holds up a glass of white, 2016 Chablis Grenouille, and then a glass of red. The executives on one of the seminars he runs at Insead decided they needed something to bind them together afterwards, so they bought a vineyard in Mendoza, Argentina, and gave him a small share. He holds up the bottle: Alpasión Grand Malbec. The label carries the fingerprints of everyone in the class, and his.

He and Engellau bought his starter, foie gras, the day before from Ernest Traiteur, one of their favourite Cannes food places. "This is the best foie gras I know," he says. I have a home-made bowl of hummus.

Kets de Vries was born in 1942 in Nazi-occupied Holland. "Food has always been a very important thing in my life because there was not much available in the war. My mother had to go on expeditions, very dangerous actually, to get food, to do some trading with the farmers on the other side of the country."

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I have done some reading about his family, his maternal grandparents and mother, and his Jewish father. The website of Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance centre in Jerusalem, lists Kets de Vries's grandparents, Florian and Emilie Houtman, and his mother, Henriette, as "righteous among the nations" — non-Jews who saved Jews during the war. His grandfather, a Dutchman, had lived in Germany, where he had married and had two girls. The family moved to the Netherlands in the 1930s, where both daughters married Jewish men. During the occupation, his grandparents hid up to 10 Jews in the farmhouse.

"I was not very conscious of it, but I was a danger, of course, because I was a small kid and I could talk when the police would pass," he says. "My mother was very much affected by it. [After the war] she talked all the time about it. With my grandfather, a strong memory I have is sitting with him listening to the radio about the Nuremberg trials." We are barely a quarter of an hour into our conversation. His voice is faltering.

"I think it has affected me. What can I do? I run this little seminar at Insead, for example. Maybe 21 people I take every year. [They are] maybe responsible for 100,000 people. If I can make them a bit more humane, a little more effective, it can have a trickle effect into the rest of the organisation. That's my fantasy. You have to dream."

At 17, Kets de Vries began his association with Harvard, attending a summer school there. After studying economics in the Netherlands, he headed back to the US and to Harvard Business School, where someone suggested he take "this funny course by a man named Abraham Zaleznik: psychoanalytic psychology and management theory".

Zaleznik was one of the pioneers of examining management through a psychoanalytic lens. Kets de Vries was initially awed by him. "Coming from a European setting, professors were always very glorious. Everybody else always called him Abe. I called him Professor Zaleznik. Partly it's the Dutch culture. In the Dutch culture you had the polite form and the not-so-polite form. I always called my father in the polite form, my mother in the informal form."

He had hopes of a Harvard career. His teaching was highly rated. But the business school refused him a full-time job. He was too close to Zaleznik, who had fallen out with the school's organisational behaviour professors. "Academics can be very good at character assassination."

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His wife appears with his main course, sea bass with beurre blanc sauce, whose ingredients include lemons from a tree in their garden that they brought back

from Tajikistan. I hold up the sea bass I have baked: a Greek dish with tomatoes, bay leaves, lemon and honey.

We return to his academic trajectory. Over the years, his wife has persuaded him that the Harvard rejection was for the best. He has spent his career at Insead, with an 11-year stint at McGill University in Montreal. If he had won a post at Harvard, he would have had to fit into its framework. “At Insead and McGill I was free. As long as I performed, I could do what I wanted.”

What he wanted was to be a “corporate pathologist”. He has written about how some narcissism can be helpful in a leader. How does one stop that from progressing to someone like Donald Trump, whom he calls “a malignant narcissist”?

“This is the most difficult question to answer.” As soon as you become a leader, he says, you are surrounded by liars. People tell you what you want to hear. “Very quickly, you find yourself in a hall of mirrors ... And people who don’t tell you what you want to hear, you fire. So you get into this echo chamber.”

## **Menu**

### **Manfred Kets de Vries**

*At home in Grasse, France*

Foie gras truffé  
Sea bass with beurre blanc  
Cherry tomato and avocado salad with Mont d’Or cheese  
Lemon meringue cake  
Espresso

Wine: 2016 Chablis Grenouille

Alpasi3n Grand Malbec

### **Michael Skapinker**

*At home in London*

Hummus  
Baked sea bass  
Tomato and avocado salad with Lubborn Creamery English goat’s cheese  
Fresh fruit salad  
Fresh mint tea

## Wine: Fish Hoek Chenin Blanc

He moves on to his next course: cherry tomatoes and avocado with Mont d'Or cheese. I have the same salad, with an English goat's cheese. What can be done to break into that echo chamber? "Every leader needs a fool," he says. Someone to tell them the truth? Who: the chairman, their best friend? "Your wife, your husband. And the fool should tell you you're full of shit, on a regular basis." Consultants? "Never hire a hungry consultant. Never." Because they will tell you what you want to hear? "Exactly."

I ask him about corporate greed and excessive executive pay. Are these overpaid bosses trying to fill an emotional hole? "It will never be filled. It's like taking cocaine. You need your fix all the time. It's actually quite sad. My father always said, 'you can only eat one steak a day'."

*Happiness is something  
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and something to hope for...*

What's missing in these people's lives? "To be very simple, they didn't get enough attention when they were younger." What can be done? "They could actually be helped by seeing a psychotherapist, spending some time with them." They could explore the meaning of their lives, he says. "What is meaning? I'll give you a little lecture. In the first place, it has to do with belonging, having good friends and family members. That's the most important thing. The second thing is having some purpose in life. I have a little purpose, I want to make a better world by helping some executives. The third thing has to do with competence. You're a writer. I'm a writer too and I get pleasure sometimes when I see a nice paragraph after bumbling around and trying to reconstruct things." Then there is choice, of a partner and career. The final requirement is "transcendence, to go beyond yourself", he says. "Happiness is something to do, someone to love and something to hope for."

Isn't the problem that many executives are sceptical about psychotherapy? Yes, he says, so these business leaders call it something else. "Why do you think everybody calls himself a coach?"

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We move on to dessert. Lemon meringue cake for him from Lenôtre, a pastry shop in Cannes, and fruit salad with a dollop of Greek yoghurt for me.

I observe that he has mentioned his father several times. He pauses and returns to the war years. "In Holland, all the Jews were picked up. And Holland was

very well organised, the percentage of people who were killed was extremely high, in spite of all the heroic statements made afterwards.” Because his father was married to a non-Jew, he was initially left alone. But then he was detained. Twice he was put in a holding camp, awaiting deportation to Auschwitz.

“My mother somehow, I think, bribed, or whatever she did, the camp commander and got him out. She spoke fluent German, remember she was brought up in Germany.” Other members of his father’s family did not escape. “They all ended up there, in ...” His voice trails off.

Unlike his mother, his father, who ran a textile company, never spoke about that time. “Having close family members — brother, sister — die, he couldn’t talk about it. Basically, he blanked it out. And it was not like he was resentful towards Germans. He built up a very good relationship with Germans. He was ready to forgive.”

His parents’ marriage did not survive. “I think my father was quite confused at the time. He fell in love with a Czech woman, he didn’t know what to do with himself. But he also must have felt very guilty because my mother saved his life. We saw him regularly. I was intrigued by the way he ran the company. He was a very good businessman, a very honourable businessman.”

The last thing you want in your garden is a wild boar. But tell that to the animal lovers. They think ‘these cute wild boars’. They’re not cute...

He switches to talking about his grandfather and the Polish teenager he hid, Nathan. “He stayed for four years or so. He became like a son to him.” Later, Nathan went to live in Israel. He had two children who both died young. “It’s a very sad story. I remember he came to my mother’s funeral. He specially made the trip from Israel to be at her funeral.”

He is looking tearful. He takes a sip of his Argentinian wine. He must often see, in the people he teaches, the events that shaped their lives, I say. “Oh, very much so.” He tries to get them to talk. “If you can tell your story to a sympathetic audience, it has a fantastic effect on you,” he says.

“I once broke my spine on top of a mountain. Normally change is very incremental. After that crazy accident, which was very painful, they say that I am somewhat of a nicer person.” He writes about the accident in his new book, *The CEO Whisperer*: on a trip to Siberia, his snowmobile driver, excited by a sighting of brown bears, failed to notice a crevice in the snow. One thing I’m not clear about: were they chasing the bears to see them or to shoot them?

He takes another sip of wine. “I’m a killer,” he says. I tell him animal-loving readers, who may already have been choking over his foie gras, will be upset. “My darker side. Really, I’m a closet zoologist and what I’ve discovered, obviously this maybe sounds like a rationalisation, is that I’m fascinated by bears.” To the point of shooting them? Hunting encourages countries to ensure animals’ survival, he says. “Your readers at the FT may get upset about it, but when you talk about the ability to have animals, what doesn’t pay doesn’t stay. And you saw that in Kenya. They stopped hunting — all the elephants got killed.”

He pauses. “By the way, I ate the bears.” He ate them? “Yeah, of course.” What do they taste like? “Like wild boar.” He gestures outside. There are five wild boars in his garden, he says. “I once shot a wild boar for dinner. I don’t know if you’ve ever had a wild boar in your garden.” No, I tell him, just squirrels and foxes. “Foxes are nothing compared to wild boars. They are bulldozers. The last thing you want in your garden is a wild boar. But tell that to the animal lovers. They think ‘these cute wild boars’. They’re not cute.”

I try to move on. “Final statement. Big bears eat young bears, for your information. They’re cannibalistic. But that doesn’t fit the Disney image.”

The next day he emails: “I hope that these expeditions (including my hunting for moose, deer, wild boar and bear) will not ‘derail’ the focus on my work activities. As I am not a vegetarian, my favourite food has always been the game and fish I collected (and that includes wild mushrooms).”

In his kitchen, he sips an espresso. I am drinking fresh mint tea. I say that he writes, at 78, quite pessimistically about old age’s physical deterioration. His father, he says, lived to 101. “He was lucky. He lived in his own house, he had someone taking care of him; it couldn’t be better, to be honest. I would sign up for that.”

But life is fickle. “I think about my accident at the top of the mountain. I broke my spine. I had four operations. It doesn’t take much.” His wife comes to say goodbye. She stands behind him, arms around him. “The best leaders,” he says, “are the ones who act and reflect. I sometimes ask them: ‘Can I see your agenda?’ And every moment is full. I ask them: ‘Are you out of your mind? Cross out some afternoons, walk around and think.’”

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