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Bosses turn to monks for breath of life

German monasteries are reinventing themselves as spiritual retreats for stressed managers

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ONE of the first things Bernd Heise noticed was the silence.

“On the way there we left a lively town for the motorway, which then turned into a smaller road, through dark trees and it became more and more lonely until the road opened out into a river valley with a monastery in it,” said the 42-year-old business-development manager with Volkswagen.

“Then we entered the monastery, had a cup of tea and went to our rooms, which were very spartan – just a bed, chair and wardrobe, no electronic devices – and we had to hand in our mobile phones as we entered. Being used to permanent access to communication tools, it was a very strange feeling.”

Heise, and 15 of his fellow executives, were participants in a new management trend taking hold in Germany, where companies are shifting from traditional team-building exercises such as paintballing to a more meditative form of stress therapy – enrolling their senior staff at spiritual retreats in monasteries.

Sitting on the banks of the river Weser in Lower Saxony, the ancient Benedictine monastery of Bursfelde has become an oasis of calm for frazzled business executives seeking to escape the high-powered world of the boardroom for a few days.

Several times a year, small groups of managers will swap their powerpoint presentations and video-conferences for meditation by candlelight and contemplative walks by the river.

Klaus Dettke, the Lutheran pastor who runs the three-day seminars, explained the concept was centred around the idea of finding an “inner rhythm” and the balance between work and rest. He said the aim was to allow managers to breathe and be themselves, moving away from a workplace mindset where people were often valued only by their achievements.

“People need to discover that they do not have only one function in life, and see themselves as a whole person. They should not just define themselves through a certain position.”

The principles were suitable for people of all faiths or none, said Dettke. Participation in prayers or church services is left to the individual’s discretion.

“It’s about staying true to yourself,” he said. “Nobody can constantly live beyond his or her strengths.”

The three-day retreat mixes meditation, lectures, group discussions and free time in the rolling countryside. Evenings can be spent alone or talking through the themes of the day.

The last evening in the 900-year-old Romanesque monastery is celebrated with psalms in a candlelit church service, where meditation is encouraged through the atmospheric melodies of Norwegian soprano saxo-phonist Jan Garbarek.

One of the highlights of the retreat is the “Benedict for Management” lecture, which explains the management techniques of St Benedict of Nursia, born about 1,500 years ago.

St Benedict emphasised the balance between spirituality and administrative duties. One of his most famous mantras was: “Who would like to lead must first be able to lead himself.”

Another popular activity is the morning walk, in silence, by the nearby river. The walkers are encouraged to compare events in their lives symbolically to the changing river – whether it is fast-flowing and out of control, or still and deep, or if obstacles and stones lie in the way.

“It’s a chance to contemplate on who am I and who would I like to be? What helps me to make decisions? What influences my life? How do I deal with disappointment?” said Dettke.

For Heise, the river walk was one of the most memorable moments. “You’re asked to think about what is important to you and to forget about work. You concentrate on the person as a whole, on your health and family,” he said.

“At the time I did the seminar there was a lot of restructuring going on at work and I had the chance to change my situation. This gave me time to think about my decisions and how they would affect my family. I could really reflect on what my priorities were and it was easier to come to a decision.

“I found the whole experience very positive and got a lot out of it, although I can see that other people might have problems to open themselves up to spirituality to find better solutions for their daily work,” he said.

The seminars also present a business opportunity for Protestant monasteries that are following in the wake of Catholic abbeys such as Ettal and Andechs in Bavaria, which offer popular pilgrimages. Companies are willing to foot a bill of up to £1,000 for each manager they send on the retreat.

Bursfelde is one of 33 Protestant monasteries and seminaries in Germany that switched from Catholicism to the Lutheran tradition during the Reformation.

Many of them are waking up to their marketing potential. According to official documentation by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), monastic communities are “gaining new significance”.

“Demand is booming at our monasteries,” said Margot Kaess-mann, the Lutheran bishop of Hanover. The Hanover Chamber of Monasteries, the umbrella organisation for the abbeys and spiritual centres in Lower Saxony, has reported a demand for their spiritual retreats that is in sharp contrast to the trend in society away from organised religion.

Last year the chamber counted 200,000 single-day and seminar guests. The peaceful, 800-year-old Wulfinghausen monastery had 2,700 overnight stays and 4,100 single-day guests last year, organised by the seven nuns of the Brotherhood of Christ who reside there.

Founded in 1236 as an Augustine monastery, it switched in 1593 to become a women’s abbey. Overnight guests are welcome but are encouraged to take part in the life of the monastery by helping in the kitchen or the garden.

According to Sister Susanne Schmitt, guests seeking to escape the “unbearable stress of work and everyday life” include teachers, doctors and social workers. In recent months there has been a rise in attendance from advertising-industry professionals and journalists.

“These kinds of people find they enjoy the silence, not having to make small talk. And then they start to listen to themselves,” said Schmitt.

The abbey offers year-round seminars, including “Oasis days” and “Christian spirituality in life and work”, which is billed “for those with responsible jobs” who want to bridge the widening gap between personal and career interests.

Retreats at Wulfinghausen – also called the “House of Silence” – are now so popular that the monastery has to turn some visitors away. Schmitt believes there are many reasons for the rise in “pilgrims” to German abbeys.

“One reason is the need for orientation in a time of globalisation. Another is the need for boundaries and rules in a society where so much is permissible,” she said.

Large companies such as Volkswagen are increasingly advertising seminars in monasteries as part of their overall training programmes for senior staff, and it appears to be a peculiarly German phenomenon.

“In terms of personal development, this seminar [Bursfelde] is one of the best. I don’t know of similar seminars anywhere else in Europe,” said Dr Barbara Gutmann, head of Volkswagen Coaching, a daughter company of the Volkswagen Group.

“The managers are taken out of their normal, everyday surroundings, and they are taken through a development process where they are given time to think about work and their private lives,” added Annegret Aberle, a trainer with VW Coaching.

“In the workplace they have to live up to extremely high expectations and they have to make decisions all the time, and this seminar gives them space just to think things through.

“The person who sits behind the desk is not just a manager but a human being, with a family background.”

While the results of the seminar were not really measurable in “hard facts”, Aberle said that participants often returned with “more understanding for their coworkers and feeling they had better leadership skills”.

“When leadership is good and clearer decisions are made, the workforce is more stable, so there is a lot of interest in these seminars,” she said.