

Niklaus Jäger, Colonel (General Staff), Commander of MIKA

"The threat is now more direct. We are directly affected."

Colonel (General Staff) Niklaus Jäger commands MIKA – the Swiss Army's center for management, information, and communication training. At his core, he remains a pioneer, always open to new ideas. But how does he manage to maintain this freshness? Simple: he takes on the role of the Red Monkey.

A *s a Colonel in the General Staff, you are a senior leader. In your view, what qualities turn someone in a leadership position into a pioneer?*

First and foremost, I believe it's essential to know yourself. Self-awareness is the foundation of everything. Incidentally, this is also the starting point of every military leadership training. The second step, for me, is self-management. Two aspects are crucial here: one is curiosity – curiosity about people, topics, and ideas. If you lose that curiosity, you end up in a downward spiral.

Self-awareness. In the army, do you have the opportunity to reflect, or is quick action usually required?

Military leadership training starts very early, and it begins with a personality profile. For us, it's crucial that leadership is always a shared responsibility. Every commander is surrounded by a team. I never evaluate leaders solely by their actions, but by the people they gather around them.

You command MIKA, which is part of the Army's Advanced Leadership Training. In this context, which areas are currently facing the greatest challenges within the army?

With the peace dividend and reforms such as Army 95 and Army 21, we developed an army with a subsidiary orientation. This means we primarily understood our role as that of a crisis response organization – addressing environmental disasters, natural hazards, and similar situations. But we failed to preserve a core competence in defense. And unfortunately, that is exactly what we now need again in the current European context.

"We failed to preserve a core competence in defense."

From the outside, the army is often perceived as an erratic monolith. How are you able to contribute your talents as a pioneer in this context?

People sometimes say the Swiss Army is a bit like the Catholic Church. That idea of a monolithic block – it's true.



But since around 2015, we've been trying to open that up. At the time, we realized that women in particular had issues with the army. More specifically: mothers. Because they have to hand over their sons to an institution they have no access to, no insight into, and no understanding of. We've tried to change that. But because the army is such a large system, it repeatedly allows space for others as well. Our current Chief of the Army has a saying: "There are Red Monkeys, and there are Farmers." I'm not sure if you're familiar with that image.

"In the army, there are Red Monkeys: disruptive elements within a rigid system."

No, I'm not familiar with it.

It comes from a major study in the United States: the Farmers fence in the prairie with barbed wire and want everything to stay the same – even the rain should come at the same time. The Red Monkeys come at night, dig under the fence, and steal the wheat and vegetables. In the Swiss Army, we have these Red Monkeys. We euphemistically call it the "innovation base," "my command," and so on. But essentially, they are all disruptive elements within a very rigid system.

And that's where you're free.

Exactly.

You're our top Red Monkey. And no one knows it.

Fortunately, there's another one who shares the same role. There are now three of us who are actually referred to as "Red Monkeys." In the medium and long term, this won't do us much good within the system. Systems tend to be conservative and prone to setbacks. That means, as soon as the support is gone, things will get interesting for us.

You're referring to the limited career options. You can't just go independent and say: "This no longer suits me. I'm founding a competing army."

Of course, we're in a hierarchical system. I rely on strong qualifications. In fact, we're in a monopolized profession.

On top of that, after about 20 years, you’re no longer marketable on the outside. And yet – and this is the analogy to the Catholic Church – we are so large that we actually need exactly these kinds of elements to drive disruption forward.

As a former head of communications – which you may still be at heart – you know that communication is not just about speaking, but equally about listening. How important is listening to you personally?

We’ve just launched a new initiative at the DDPS level, aimed at changing the department’s leadership culture. And to everyone’s surprise, the first key point is “self-awareness,” and the second is “the ability to listen.” That often gets lost in military socialization. After all, we’re always the oldest, the best trained, and we’re constantly dealing with new young recruits. At some point, you end up in this loop – like in the movie Groundhog Day. The same thing keeps happening over and over. That needs to be broken. But the higher up you go, the harder it becomes.

How do you make sure that you’re still truly able to listen?

By forcing myself to take notes. By forcing myself to lead with questions. And by making sure that we create very clear spaces where things are simply presented and argued first – only afterward do we ask questions.

As you mentioned, we are living in different times compared to ten years ago. The perception of threats has changed significantly. Do you see this more as an opportunity or as a danger?

It’s a double-edged sword. Seeing someone like Merkel as a “Chancellor of Peace” reflects a somewhat Eurocentric perspective. She was a proponent of the idea of “cooperation through interlinked trade.” But globally, there have always been between 30 and 50 open conflicts. Now the threat is more direct, closer. My three major concerns are: first, a global economic crisis. Second, this culture of bullying – the law of the strongest. The way supranational organizations are being treated now makes it possible again to conquer countries. And third, the cultural conflict that has emerged, especially in the United States. But more concerning, also closer to home: Hungary and Slovakia – and Poland will follow. We’re now dealing with confrontations and questions we could never have imagined before.

Which ones do you mean specifically?

Hungary is quite clear. In fact, Hungary served as a model for Project 2025 by the Heritage Foundation and Trump. Their core question is: “How can you use democratic means to dismantle a democratic state and turn it into an authoritarian one?” The insight: first, you have to eliminate all authorities – or, so to speak, shoot them down. Then come the media, then the judiciary, and finally, you have to bring education into line. That’s essentially what happened in Hungary. And that is what’s causing some concern. We are now directly affected.

What are the consequences?

This can have far-reaching consequences immediately: uncertainty, unrest. In fact, I’ve been trained for exactly such a situation for the past twenty years. So I feel completely at ease – because this is exactly what we’ve always anticipated, while always hoping it would never happen. I would much prefer if it weren’t the case.

But we’ve always believed that at some point, change could also come to Europe.

"I’ve been trained for exactly this kind of situation for twenty years."

You’re surely perceived differently than you were twenty years ago.

That too is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the change is significant. When I’m on the train, people ask me what I think. When I’m at a restaurant, I get invited to join. When I give talks, it’s no longer just at officers’ associations, but also at organizations like the Zurich Asylum Organization. So there are people who suddenly take an interest in our processes and our way of thinking – people who never did before. On the other hand, the pressure to justify what we’re aiming for remains just as strong as ever.

I imagine that in your position, you don’t only face external resistance. How do you deal with internal resistance?

It’s a bit like waking up in the morning and saying: “If I don’t feel any pain, I must be dead.” So if I ever stopped encountering resistance, I’d feel like I was doing the wrong things. For me, resistance is always a sign that we’ve hit trigger points, pushed someone out of their comfort zone, and identified issues that are probably worth pursuing. That’s why I always feel I grow through resistance. In a way, I almost need it – it helps me reflect and put things into perspective. You’ll never be able to anticipate all resistance in advance.

Is there anything I haven’t asked that you would have liked to say?

No, for me this was truly interesting. It really did me good. I realize that we live in bubbles. Right now, things in my environment are incredibly exciting. I get to do many things that actually have nothing to do with the military at all.

For example?

We’ve been trying to bring the military closer to the business world – or bring ourselves into the business world. Educational institutions that were once said to never cooperate with the army are now participating in training programs with us. So something really has changed.

"Right now, we have a window of opportunity where many things are possible."

Apparently on both sides. When people come closer together, it’s usually because both have gone through some sort of development.

Sure. That’s curiosity. I feel like I learn just as much during an interview as I do when giving a lecture. I think we’re fortunate right now. “Fortunate” might be an exaggeration – but we do have this window of opportunity where many things are possible.

Interview: thk.