



CASE STUDY

A NEW MODEL FOR ORGANISATIONS

ARDANTA'S EMPLOYEE-OWNED
COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

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COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

ISSUED JANUARY 2016



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Colophon

This case study was written by author and journalist Alison Maitland, with photography by Frank van Driel. Both are alumni of PresenceAtWork's collective leadership programme. Graphic design by Today's Team.

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COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP IS A NON-HIERARCHICAL MODEL

Many organisations say they would like to improve their results by empowering their people to innovate and take responsibility for better solutions, but this often proves elusive. A new approach, being pioneered in the Netherlands and Australia to meet the challenges of a complex and fast-changing world, is achieving remarkable outcomes. It is called collective leadership. This case study tells the story of one company's experience of collective leadership, and the profound cultural shift it generated.

The company

Ardanta is a medium-sized Dutch insurance company, part of the large ASR Netherlands insurance group, which specialises in funeral policies.

The challenges

In the turbulent period after the 2008 financial crisis, Ardanta faced big challenges: mistrust of the financial sector; growing competition from new channels; and increased price transparency. Then, in 2012, it had to handle a massive increase in policies transferred from the parent company. This growth continued in 2015 with the integration of a new acquisition.

Before

Employees were afraid of taking responsibility and pushed decisions upwards. Ardanta's business portfolio and distribution network were outdated.

The programme

Collective leadership is a non-hierarchical model developed by Roelien Boksem and Jane Weber, founders of the consultancy PresenceAtWork. In their experiential programme, participants learn to understand and value their own and each other's strengths, discovering when to step into leadership and when to follow, capitalising on the collective intelligence of the team.

After

After the executive team had gone through the programme, they became more collaborative and willing to ask each other for help. Communication was more open and there was less conflict. The turning point came in 2014, when employees were trained in collective leadership by the management team. People started to speak up, propose solutions and take responsibility for decisions.

Business results

The breakthroughs from the collective leadership approach, combined with LEAN Six Sigma operational process improvements, led to a sharp increase in productivity, large cost savings, a drop in customer complaints and staff absenteeism, and innovations generated by greater collaboration between departments.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



THE ARDANTA STORY

Nikki Nijland: Senior employee front office

IT WAS LIKE COMING HOME

Nikki Nijland knew that a profound change of culture was under way when she joined Dutch insurance company Ardanta as an employee at the start of 2015. The 30-year-old had been a contractor at the firm for just over a year and noticed that colleagues were much more comfortable than in the past about speaking up.

As soon as she was hired, she went on a programme in collective leadership and discovered what was behind the transformation in behaviour. This programme was not just for Ardanta's leaders. It was for everyone, and all employees had gone through it. At every level, people were taking responsibility and stepping up as leaders when the situation required.

Through the programme, Nijland learned how to make best use of her own combination of strengths, chief of which is creativity. "I've never worked in a company that allows you to express your own ideas so much," she explains. "You can say anything you want to say and it's ok, even if it's been tried before. It was like coming home. I can be who I am."

Nijland is a recent recruit to a groundbreaking model of leadership training unrolled at Ardanta over the past five years. On the surface, the company is an unlikely candidate for such innovation. It is part of a large insurance group, ASR Netherlands, and specialises in funeral policies. It is located in Enschede, on the Dutch border with Germany, where people are known for a down-to-earth, no-nonsense attitude to life.

Yet it is here, as both leaders and employees attest, that a remarkable experiment has shifted the organisational culture from one of hierarchy and top-down control to empowerment and co-creation. Central to this shift is the 'collective leadership' programme developed by Roelien Boksem and Jane Weber, founders of the consultancy PresenceAtWork.

Their programme emphasises the 'being' rather than the 'doing' of leadership, deepening participants' awareness of themselves, of the larger system of which they are part and of their impact on others. Through experiential learning - involving head, heart and gut - it encourages authentic self-expression, which creates trust within the group. In this environment of trust, the programme pushes people physically and emotionally to explore their limits and potential. By learning more about their own strengths and understanding each other's strengths, participants discover when to lead and when to follow, harnessing the collective intelligence of the group.

"The value of it is in the way people have changed - the way they think and behave together," says Guido Horst, current CEO. "We felt that, if we didn't make the change, we wouldn't be here 10 years from now."

POST-CRISIS BEGINNINGS

As Horst makes clear, there was urgency behind the decision to embark on the programme. Ardanta and its parent ASR had been part of Fortis, the financial group that collapsed in 2008. The Dutch state took over all of Fortis' Dutch operations. Ardanta, along with Europeesche, a leisure insurance business, continued as distinct brands within ASR.

Insurers faced big challenges: digital technology and the fallout from the global financial crisis were transforming the market. There was increased competition from new channels, growing price transparency through comparison websites, and general mistrust of the financial sector.

Three successive CEOs have steered Ardanta through this turbulent period. Each of them has played a key role in the development of collective leadership, taking the company to the next level.



"The value of it is in the way people have changed - the way they think and behave together. We felt that, if we didn't make the change, we wouldn't be here 10 years from now."

Guido Horst: Ardanta CEO 2014-Present





“I saw the changes in the management team meetings. We started working together and asking each other for help.”

Robert van der Schaaf: Ardanta CEO 2008-2012

CHANGING COURSE

When Robert van der Schaaf came in as CEO in 2008, he knew Ardanta had to change. “The business was pretty successful but it had an outdated portfolio, it was sitting in a very outdated building, and it had an outdated distribution network,” he says. “We had to transform from a shareholder-only model to a multi-stakeholder model in which employees, shareholders and customers were in balance.”

Van der Schaaf, who now heads the non-life insurance business of ASR in Utrecht, noticed that the management team at Ardanta were so busy spinning plates in the air that they could not see the changes in the marketplace. Something else was missing - the voice of employees, many of them with decades of service to the company. “We only ever discussed business topics, never ‘what do you feel?’ or ‘what’s your opinion?’ Everyone just followed the leader.”

He contacted Boksem, who had successfully coached a team for him at Fortis ASR, and asked if she could run a programme for Ardanta’s executives. Boksem came from the financial sector, having worked at Fortis, but had quit in 2007 because she could not see a future for herself in a combined Fortis-ABN Amro group. She knew that her strength lay in mobilising teams behind a shared purpose and she was keen to turn this into a business.

In late 2007, Boksem met Weber, a senior consultant and coach at IBM in Australia, on a coaching and leadership course in San Francisco. Finding common cause in their view that the world needed collective leadership, they joined forces to offer a new approach to organisations. (See Q&A)

Most leadership programmes at the time focused on individual leadership - “who I need to be personally in order to have an impact and make a difference in the world,” explains Weber. “Our world view of systems-aware leadership had not, to our knowledge, been explored or implemented.”

Boksem saw the request from Ardanta as an opportunity to try out new ways of working, rather than to wait and hope that ‘the old normal’ of the pre-crisis era would return. Talking on a long drive from the South of the Netherlands to Enschede, she says: “In this remote part of the country, we’re prototyping the next phase for organisations.”

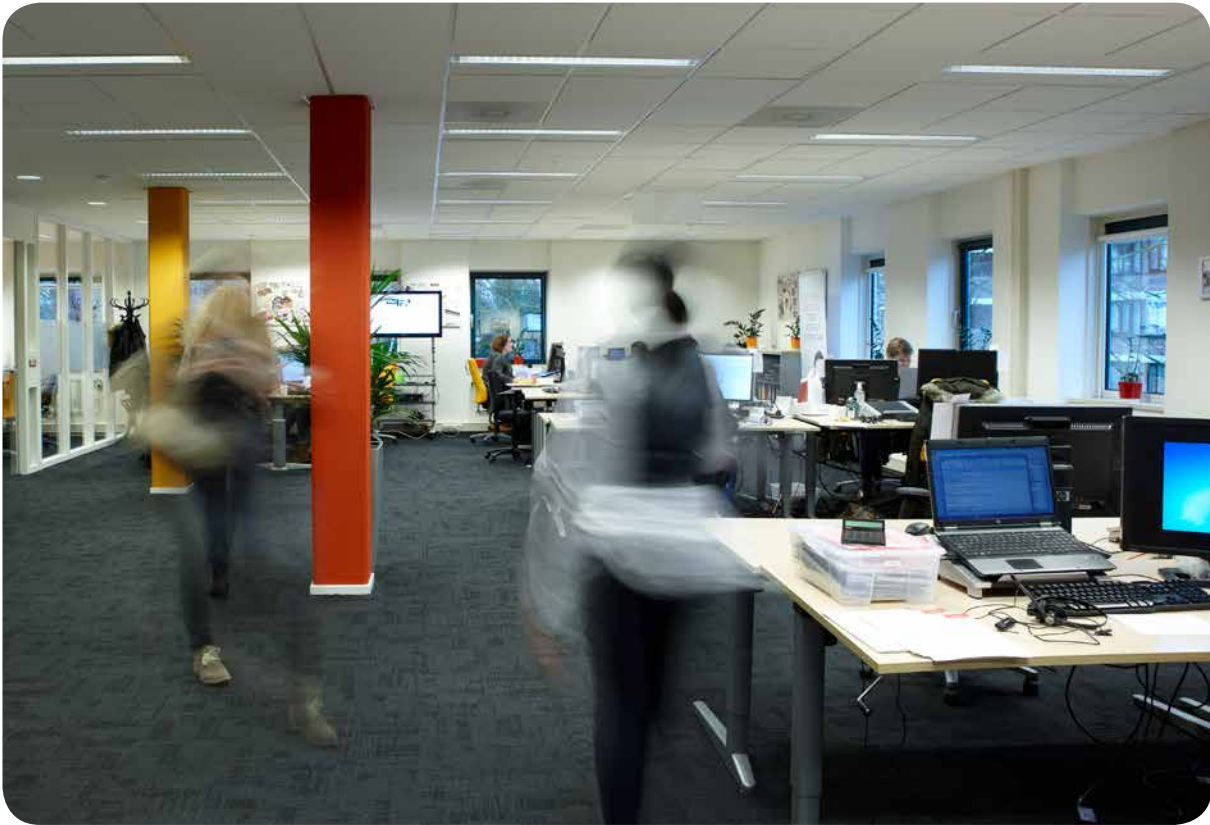
Collective leadership is part of a wave of new thinking that is gathering force in response to the challenges of a complex, uncertain and fast-changing world. Weber and Boksem’s approach combines both modern and ancient philosophies. Its intellectual core is influenced by the work of Peter Senge and colleagues (*Presence*), Joseph Jaworski (*Synchronicity*), Otto Scharmer (*Theory U*) and the Arbing Institute (*Leadership and Self-Deception*). Central to the training is PresenceAtWork’s Leader Being Strength Indicator® (LBSI), an assessment methodology that profiles an individual’s strongest combination of four body-based strengths, out of a possible nine, drawing on the disciplines of physical therapy and the martial arts.

Between late 2009 and early 2012, the Ardanta leadership team took part in a series of retreats with PresenceAtWork at carefully timed intervals, interspersed with individual and group coaching and integration sessions. The retreats progressed from understanding their personal strengths and impact to knowing their collective strengths and how to lead and innovate together.

"I saw the changes in the management team meetings," says Van der Schaaf. "We started working together and asking each other for help. I thought we were much more open and enthusiastic about the things we had to do in Ardanta. We were prouder of ourselves and the company."

He began to involve employees by asking them individually for their views on his actions as CEO. "At first they were afraid. The conditioning was that when you had to speak to the director, there's a problem. People would stand in the hallway waiting to be called in. By the time I left the company, they were already in there, sitting at the table. The impact on the business was that we got much more relevant and detailed information about our customers from the employees who speak to them directly."

The physical workplace also changed. The management team moved into a room together instead of having separate offices. Out went the uniform grey, to be replaced by glass and bright colours. In the foyer, dining area and meeting spaces, there are yellow chairs and orange and red walls. On the walls are large posters with photos of individual employees and quotes from them. "Yesterday we were honest but a bit vague," says one. "From today, we're honest and always clear."



GOING DEEPER AND WIDER

The temptation for new bosses is to make their mark by jettisoning the innovations of their predecessor. That did not happen at Ardanta. When Van der Schaaf handed over to Philippe Wits in 2012, he signed him up for the next collective leadership retreat. He knew that abandoning the programme would be very disruptive. “If Philippe had stopped it, the management team would have rebelled because they saw what it brought to them and to the company.”

Wits is very different from his predecessor, as their LBSI profiles show. Where Van der Schaaf is an analyst and decisive pioneer, Wits is a thinker and an inspiring transformer.

Impressed by the strong foundations already in place, Wits nonetheless felt that the company needed a greater understanding of what it stood for and why it existed. He also thought the management team were not yet ‘living’ collective leadership. There was not enough dialogue within the team and between managers and employees. “People were afraid of taking responsibility and pushed a lot of decision-making upwards.”

He arrived as ASR was centralising all the group’s funeral policies at Ardanta, increasing the number it handled sixfold to 4.2m policies. The business was not prepared operationally to process them. Wits also saw that the model of growth based on selling new policies was out of date because younger people were less interested in funeral insurance. Ardanta needed to find new ways of connecting with customers. There was much to do.

At first Wits was sceptical about collective leadership and, as a thinker, sought academic evidence of its effectiveness. Then he experienced it for himself. “Most leadership programmes I’ve done were geared to being smarter and more aware of leadership in a cognitive way,” he says. “When you return to the working environment, you immediately lose it. The impact of this programme was profound.

I was touched to the core. I realised that I am ok, rather than ‘not sufficient’. It changed fundamentally the way I look at myself. I am now also faster at seeing others for who they are, not what they are.”

He was so convinced that he decided to drive the concepts deep into the company. Every employee would go through the programme. Even more daringly, the people leading it would not be PresenceAtWork but the management team themselves. This ‘train-the-trainer’ approach is what PresenceAtWork now recommends as the best way to embed the concepts deeply inside an organisation.

This marked the turning point when the culture really began to change. For many, the prospect of the programme was unsettling. “There was a lot of anxiety, but also curiosity,” says Wits. “For some it was their first training of any kind. They would not be sleeping at home. They were told: Bring your sports shoes. There was fear about not knowing what it would be like.”

The management team, even those most committed to the programme, were equally nervous about becoming programme facilitators. Wits, too, had moments of doubt, but decided to follow his gut instinct. “I said to them: I fully trust that you’re able to do it. It’s going to be bigger than we ever thought.”

“The impact of this programme was profound. I was touched to the core. I realised that I am ok, rather than ‘not sufficient’. It changed fundamentally the way I look at myself.”

Philippe Wits: Ardanta CEO 2012-2014

Peter Slaghekke, head of operations & IT, explains how he felt at the time. "My first reaction was: 'Can I do this? I haven't done this before!' But it was so exciting in the end that we couldn't wait to co-lead the next retreat. Teaching it helped me to get to know the programme better myself."

Slaghekke and his colleague Gerard van Zuilekom, head of sales and marketing, talk about how it changed their perceptions of themselves and each other. Previously, Slaghekke had felt isolated in the executive team, wondering why his colleagues did not listen to his warnings about the likely impact of decisions. From their point of view, it seemed that he was always holding things up.

"My primary LBSI strength is 'thinking,'" he says. "I felt better when my colleagues and I knew that, because previously we had had conflict. I use it all the time now. I ask for time to investigate, or I tell them: 'You're going too fast - help me look into this first.' It has enabled us to reach better decisions in the team."

Van Zuilekom agrees. His primary LBSI strength is 'sense of direction' - sensing what is coming and often taking split-second decisions. "My slogan from the programme is 'The slower you go, the faster you'll get there,'" he says. "I'm more focused now, less fragmented, less stretched and more in the here-and-now than the past or future. I know the LBSI profiles of my colleagues and have more insight into the whole."

On top of his role at Ardanta, Van Zuilekom has been assigned to manage operations at Axent, an insurance company it recently acquired. In the past, he says, he was always in a hurry, and by the evening he felt drained of energy. "Now I'm doing two jobs, but it doesn't feel pressured."

The impact on employees was similarly transformational, according to Wits. When they came back from the retreats, there was a very strong connection between them and a sense of calm. "They opened up with me in a good way, with a lot of emotion. They began to look at the management team as individual people. It put us all on a par with each other. People stepped up when needed. Almost 100% of decisions used to come to me. At the end of my tour, it was down to 20-30%."

Wits moved on to be director of the life business of ASR. He is collaborating with Boksem on introducing collective leadership into his new management team. "It's such a magical thing that happens when people really step into it," he says. "I'm proud that Ardanta is still living it. When I left, a lot of people cried. I said, 'I truly believe in you. You guys can do it on your own.' People were wondering if the new CEO would stop the programme. I told them they were responsible for bringing him into the system and he would have to adapt to it."

"I'm more focused now, less fragmented, less stretched and more in the here-and-now than the past or future."

Gerard van Zuilekom:
head of sales and marketing



"Teaching it helped me to get to know the programme better myself."

Gerard van Zuilekom:
head of sales and marketing

Peter Slaghekke:
head of operations & IT

MAINTAINING THE MOMENTUM

He was right, although Guido Horst, who arrived as CEO in March 2014, did not need much persuading. He had spoken with Wits and Bokxem and was keen to explore further. Almost immediately he attended a retreat for 'Allies' of the collective leadership approach, in a forest setting in the heart of the Netherlands.

He had already been on many leadership courses, but most had not left positive memories. "You were supposed to brag about the size of your lease car, how many people you are leading, what your turnover is. It was a conquering-the-world approach," he says. "It never came near to my core, not the way this programme did."

For someone used to being 'in charge', the revelations for Horst were that there is nothing wrong with letting others step in and lead, and that co-creation is very valuable. He discovered that his primary LBSI strength is 'integration', bringing harmony and inclusiveness. "I'm keen to have everyone in, and I try to persuade people to be part of the process. Together we can do much more than we usually think we can."

This does not mean that everyone survived the changes. In the past, Ardanta represented a job for life. But there have been a few departures in recent years. "You have to recognise that not every employee is able to meet the new standards," Horst says.

His role has been to keep up the momentum, especially as Ardanta grows. "There's a risk that somewhere on the road we lose what we learned. We discuss this a lot. You need to reinforce the message. This is an opportunity for me."

There are plans for twice-yearly retreats for employees, and for team managers to be trained to lead new employees through the programme.

Horst and Bokxem took everyone away on a 'Travel Day', where they experienced each department as if it were a country, with its own struggles and challenges. This exercise led to ideas for improvements, including 'knowledge lunches', where departments take it in turns to explain to the rest of the company what they do.

Employees and managers also use the language of collective leadership in their daily activities to remind each other 'to be present', 'to co-create' and 'to step in' or 'step out'.

“*"I'm keen to have everyone in, and I try to persuade people to be part of the process. Together we can do much more than we usually think we can."*

Guido Horst: Ardanta CEO 2014 - Present

HOW THE BUSINESS HAS BENEFITED

Ardanta had been struggling to process the huge influx of policies from its ASR parent, without any change in its usual processes. At the end of 2013, there was a backlog of 10,000 pending client files, and customers had to wait five to six weeks for their requests to be answered. Despite huge efforts, the company was failing to meet its targets for response times and service levels.

Things changed dramatically in 2014 as all the employees went through the Collective Leadership programme and started to take responsibility for initiating solutions.

- By the end of 2014, the backlog was down to 3,000 policies. Customer applications were processed within the target time of five days. The improvement continued into 2015, even though the company's growing portfolio generated far more letters and calls.
- The company achieved its target of answering 80% of incoming calls within 30 seconds.
- Two new direct sales channels - telephone and online - were launched under Wits' leadership and within two months accounted for 13% of total sales in a competitive and saturated market.
- Productivity, as measured by customer mail processed per person per hour, increased by 66% in 2014. In the past, letters to customers had to be approved by management. Now employees can write and send them out themselves.
- The absenteeism rate has fallen from 11% in 2012 to 4.5% at the end of 2015, and recruitment costs have fallen by 20% because of low staff turnover and absenteeism.
- Because of the faster processing times, the number of complaint calls from customers fell by 87%.

“Things never develop in a straight line. It's good to take the road less travelled with others, to achieve a better result.”

Joris Kroner:
online marketing specialist

Dirk Jan van der Meij:
head of front office

Under the LEAN approach, employees are encouraged to speak up about blockages in the system and collaborate on more efficient processes to which everyone has to commit themselves. One major result was that termination of client policies was reduced by a third, saving €800,000 in 2015, says Dirk Jan van der Meij, the executive responsible for LEAN.

This was because the front office and finance department worked together to analyse client behaviour and came up with new ideas to retain policies, such as closer contact with customers and easier ways for them to pay. Collective leadership and LEAN build on each other: "There wasn't one single person who could bring the solution," he says. "It needed everyone to step in."

Another outcome was a breakthrough in collaboration on a new web portal. Website innovations used to create conflict between the marketing and IT departments - one focused on rapid, creative design, the other on ensuring security. The management team gathered the different parties in a room and reminded them of what they had learned about collective leadership. It galvanised them into focusing on their shared purpose.

Joris Kroner, online marketing specialist, takes up the story. He explains how he fought the permissions required by IT, arguing they would slow down the continuous updates that the portal needed. Then the collective leadership programme opened people's eyes to the need for joint solutions. "Now, two years down the line, I'm working more on a daily basis with the IT team than with marketing," he says. "Things never develop in a straight line. It's good to take the road less travelled with others, to achieve a better result."

A third example relates to self-management, a practice attracting growing interest among organisational innovators and management thinkers. Frederic Laloux, for example, features self-managed teams in his book *Reinventing Organizations*.

While Ardanta has not dispensed with hierarchy altogether, collective leadership has led to the emergence of self-managing teams. One example: in 2014, employees from account management, customer service and marketing, all of whom deal with external insurance brokers, came together with no input from the executive team to create an 'intermediary desk' to provide brokers with a better service.

CAN COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP WORK ANYWHERE?

Ardanta is a medium-sized company with about 100 people. This has made it easier to impact every employee relatively quickly. Could the collective leadership approach work in larger companies, or businesses with bigger egos at the top?

Horst thinks it could. "The concepts in collective leadership are important for big companies as well. If the board feels an urge for change, it can be rolled out in a large corporate environment. But there are some risks. The bigger the company, the more non-believers ... need to be motivated to take part."

Jane Weber says the first step, for organisations of any size, is to work with the senior leadership team. That may be the top executive management or the leaders of a business unit, which can be very similar to working with a small company.

"Ego tends to be quickly addressed and broken down by the experience of our first retreat which connects people in their humanity as equals," she says. "The bigger and more pervasive the egos, the more challenging this can be, and we are not pretending that this is easy, or that this leadership approach will be what all organisations will want to adopt. However, we are very aware of the human impact of our work, and that impact occurs whether people have big or small egos."

The human impact is very clear to Nikki Nijland. In her front-office role, she not only is enjoying the increased collaboration with other teams, but also knows better where her own boundaries are. "When people ask me to do things, I can say: No, this is not the moment."

Aware of her own impact on colleagues and the business, she is ambitious for a more senior role. "Knowing my strengths makes me more effective in searching for new possibilities," she says. "And I think my way of listening more to the customer and thinking of the possibilities for increasing satisfaction makes our service at Ardanta more effective."



WHAT IT MEANS TO ME AS A LEADER

Marjolein Tabois: team manager, front office at Ardanta

“I used to feel insecurity about whether I was a good leader of my team. I got more confidence to be who I am and that that is good enough. My primary role as a leader is to be there for people and make sure they have the space to develop themselves. When you have confidence, you can do more for people than when you are searching for yourself. I see what the programme brought me, so I'd like others to have the experience.”

Marjolein Tabois: team manager, front office at Ardanta

“When we were in the woods, I realised how long it took for me to ask for help. I like to help others but I don't let people help me. It was a light bulb moment.”

Robert van der Schaaf: former Ardanta CEO

“It gave me more ambition. We had the coaching and afterwards I became a team leader. Knowing more about my team's LBSI profiles helps me to coach them and look at what they want to reach. I use my story as an example.”

Marjan ten Hove: team manager, client contact at Ardanta

“I've learned that an idea is not important because it's attached to me, and that it's always better to co-create. I don't spend so much time now thinking about where my career is going. When the output is good, the career follows.”

Gerard van Zuilekom: head of sales and marketing at Ardanta

“I never had any heroes. I respect a lot of people. I don't want to be a hero. People become very dependent, and I believe they can do it by themselves.”

Philippe Wits: former Ardanta CEO



ABOUT COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Jane Weber: Principal PresenceAtWork Asia Pacific

Q&A WITH THE FOUNDERS

Roelien Bokxem and Jane Weber are founders of PresenceAtWork, the consulting firm that developed collective leadership. Bokxem, based in the Netherlands, previously worked in the financial sector at Fortis Bank, and Weber, based in Australia, spent many years in HR at IBM. Both are experienced leadership coaches, trainers, facilitators and entrepreneurs, trained in Co-active Coaching with the Coaches Training Institute (www.thecoaches.com), and in Organisational and Relationship System Coaching with the Centre for Right Relationship (www.crrglobal.com).

What is collective leadership?

Jane: Collective leadership refers to individuals having a primary focus on the shared goals of the organisation, while still maintaining full accountability for their own functional responsibilities. Team members recognise that they each have a key role to play in contributing their personal talents, strengths and insights to the collective task. This requires the ability to think and behave with systems awareness, knowing one's own particular strengths, what every other member of the team can contribute, and how to leverage all the different talents together to maximise performance. There's no room for ego or hierarchy in true collective leadership. Connecting together around shared purpose, each team member holds the organisation's goals as the most important, and maintains a disciplined focus on achieving those goals together.

Roelien: We use the metaphor of a flock of geese. Geese fly in a V-formation, which protects them from the wind. There is no hierarchy. Each takes it in turn to be the leader, to be in the middle, or to take up the rear, and they shift and re-pattern their system according to the needs of the moment. The whole flock is connected and stays in formation, even as individual positions change. They sense collectively when to move, when to change direction, or when to stop, in tune with the wider system around them. They all stay focused, and encourage each other by honking. Like them, we need the whole system in order to be at our full potential. We are only as strong as our weakest link.

What led you to develop this approach?

Roelien: The global financial crisis caused so much suffering in organisations that it propelled us into action. I had left Fortis Bank a year before the drama kicked in, but I was still in touch with all that fear from a distance, and it activated me. I had a huge sense of urgency and with great determination prepared myself to lead a cultural transformation with them.

Jane: Our source of inspiration was a personal dream of how things could be different if only everyone knew how to connect and collaborate in service of the whole. At the time of this dream, there was no evidence of how this could be accomplished at the level of a whole organisation.

How long did it take to devise the programme? Has it evolved?

Roelien: It took two years to develop, design, prototype and test the first deployments of the core four-retreat programme with our early clients. We are deepening our understanding all the time and taking it in new directions in response to client requests: for example, employee programmes, train-the-trainer solutions and additional retreats to support leaders in maintaining collective leadership, especially through periods of disruptive change.

Collective Leadership Programme Principles

Three principles underpin PresenceAtWork's systems approach to leadership:

1. Focus on the 'Being' as Opposed to the 'Doing' of Leadership

The emphasis is on exploring the authentic being that we are at our core, versus the traditional focus on what leaders are supposed to be doing.

2. Leading by Capitalising on Collective Intelligence

It is no longer possible for one person to know everything: leaders need to be able to tap into the wisdom of the larger system and lead from there.

3. Learning from the Emerging Future as Opposed to Learning from the Past

Leaders need to grasp the power of being fully present in order to see with fresh eyes, read the signals of change and discover the 'emerging future'.

What are the key features of the programme?

Jane: Three principles are the foundation of everything we do. The first is balancing appropriately between the 'being' of leadership and the 'doing' of leadership. The second is leading from a whole systems perspective, harnessing the collective intelligence, instead of trying to be a heroic 'leader on the rock'. The third is leading by sensing the emerging future rather than relying only on past experience.

Roelien: We create experiential, body-based learning, bypassing the head wherever possible. Our Leader Being Strength Indicator® (LBSI) assessment method brings in body intelligence from the start. Using physical energy, people rapidly gain a sense of how we are all different, with different strengths, and of when we need to step forward, and when to step back. We don't teach or lecture. We use dialogue and participation. We assume a lot of knowledge within the group that we can all build on. This creates involvement and confidence. We need confidence for people to step forward and take ownership.



Roelien Boksem: Principal PresenceAtWork Europe

Leader Being Strength Indicator (LBSI)©

It is time to make a shift from our primary focus on the brain: recent findings in neuroscience inform us that we actually have three intelligence centres in our body: the one in the head that we are all familiar with, one in the heart and one in the gut. Awakening our awareness of these three centres gives us the potential to access the power of our full body intelligence.

PresenceAtWork's Leader Being Strength Indicator (LBSI)© develops this awareness. Working with head, heart and gut, leaders gain insight into their personal strengths and where to focus for contribution and personal growth. Alignment between these intelligence centres results in increased awareness and sharper thinking.

For the system as a whole, LBSI provides a common framework within which team members can understand and appreciate one another; and gain insight into their combined strengths and challenges. LBSI supports each person to be at his or her most effective and most fulfilled, better able to collaborate within the system to achieve shared goals.

Is this leadership programme very different from others?

Jane: As far as we understand it, yes. In 2011, the Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado posited collective leadership as a future trend and suggested that no one yet knew how to train these complex competencies. By 2012 we had already trained three executive teams in our full four-retreat programme, and these organisations actively practised collective leadership and were engaged in planning to roll it out to all their employees. When we contacted CCL about this, they expressed amazement and indicated that, in their experience, our work was breaking new ground in the marketplace. They have since interviewed us and cited our work.

What did you learn from the pilot programmes?

Jane: We learned that leadership teams are hungry for relationships based on respect, appreciation, honesty, openness and authenticity. It is far more joyful and fulfilling to be part of achieving whole-organisation success than to enjoy personal, or hero, success. People are able and willing to be far more creative and innovative, and to take risks for the sake of innovation, when there is full permission in the system for breakthrough thinking and honest and open communication.

Roelien: We know that we can dramatically change the corporate climate within a year by having the core team of managers in our programme. It then takes another year for them to learn how to create the circumstances for their employee teams to step in as well.

You've integrated your programme with other methodologies, such as LEAN Six Sigma. How does that work?

Roelien: LEAN Six Sigma is complementary as it focuses on the doing side of leadership, whereas we focus on the being side. You need both. LEAN requires people to step back and look at their work, to generate a broader view of where improvements can be made, which then strengthens the whole. Both LEAN and collective leadership place responsibility as low as possible in the organisation.

People who have been on your programme often sound as if they have taken a dose of happy pills. Why?

Jane: The programme is personally very fulfilling and empowering. People experience for themselves how they can overcome limiting beliefs and achieve things that they previously thought impossible. In addition to their greatly increased confidence, people grow in their self-awareness, make exciting discoveries about themselves, and experience the pleasure of being acknowledged by others for their qualities. They discover the joy of co-creating and co-leading with others, and what a relief that is from thinking that you have to know everything and be able to do everything by yourself.



WHO ELSE IS DOING IT?

Europeesche, the leisure insurance arm of ASR, was an early explorer of collective leadership, starting in 2009. The executive team has now been through six retreats, and employees embarked on the programme in 2013.

CEO Gerard ten Brincke says: "In my experience, there is usually an unconscious norm in a team that every member must be able to do everything. Some talents overlap, but others are missing. So you get a competition between egos. In a team focused on collective leadership, you know everyone's talents and how they complement each other, and everyone is able to contribute their strength. Offering unsolicited help and appreciation comes more naturally, especially because you also receive it from other people. As a result, it's much easier to achieve your team goals."

ASR life division's management team is doing the programme, under Philippe Wits' leadership.

He comments on the impact. "People in ASR are saying: We don't know what's changed but we've noticed a lot of calm. There's a sense of direction, people are very focused, and you're delivering results."

Enware Australia, a manufacturer of specialist taps and environmental and safety systems, has taken its senior leadership team through the first three retreats of the programme.

Adam Degnan, Managing Director, says: "We have a group of great people but we were not a great team because we did not fully understand or appreciate ourselves or each other. This journey opened our eyes, our hearts and our minds. Now I have the great team I need to build our business performance."

Other organisations doing collective leadership are:

First Mortgage Services & First Title, a property risk insurer in Australia and New Zealand.

TaxModel, an in-house consulting and tax software firm in the Netherlands, run by Boksem's partner.

Reutlingen University's ESB Business School, Germany, where PresenceAtWork is teaching an introduction to collective leadership on the Strategic Sales Management Masters Programme.

THE TIME FOR THIS HAS COME

Wherever we look we see organisations whose employees are unhappy or just plain disengaged. In these conditions it is not possible for people to perform to their potential. We were longing for something else, something more fulfilling. It sparked us on our journey.

It is six years on and our organisation of two is now 15 people strong. It spans Europe, Asia Pacific and the Americas. While this may look tiny compared to traditional business models, we have intentionally invested in a slow growth approach. We believe this has been essential to create the solid foundations needed to support and role model these processes of change in communities of work and life.

We do not pretend that collective leadership is easy. As we built PresenceAtWork we have sought to practise systems-aware leadership behaviours in our own organisation at all times. We have seen and experienced for ourselves how integrating systems thinking and behaviour with embodied leadership practices opens the door for new levels of innovation and creativity, and the difference it is making. This is both an exhilarating and a humbling experience.

With over five years' experience of implementing our concepts, we can say that we have developed a methodology that will support an organisation to transform itself in two to three years. The key question for leaders today is how to grasp this opportunity and what would be the right first step for their organisation.

As this case study demonstrates, there is a way of changing how people feel - and therefore how they perform. The time for this has come.

We are ready.

Jane Weber
Roelien Boksem



FROM THE FOUNDERS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Robert van der Schaaf and Gerard ten Brincke, the two pioneering CEOs, who knew that a different way of leading was needed and were willing to commit themselves and their teams to an as yet untried and untested leadership approach that would demand their investment over a period of 12 months.

Philippe Wits and Guido Horst, who took our work forward from its prototyping stages and who, along with Gerard ten Brincke, decided that collective leadership needed to be taken down the line to all employees. They worked with us tirelessly in the deployment of our first employee programmes.

Adam Degnan, whose vision and quest for transformational change in his company led him to become the first executive in Australia to commit his senior leadership team to an ongoing journey with us that began two years ago.

Hank Moonen and Phil Gough, our partners, who kept their faith in our ideas, encouraged us as we got started and along the way. Hank and Phil not only contributed their considerable talents as we formed and expanded; they were also among our first alumni.

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Jorn Wolfs and Gertjan van Heertum, members of our PresenceAtWork team from the early days who embraced this way of leading without hesitation and who have played valuable roles, including designing our LBSI software.

WHO WE ARE

PresenceAtWork is a leadership development consultancy specialising in collective leadership. By applying systems principles, we create learning that inspires leadership teams to collaborate and innovate together more effectively, managing through change, growing in resilience and building an engaged and high-performing workplace.

Our leading-edge models are focused on leadership embodiment and based on the premise that answers to complex challenges will emerge from the collective wisdom. Our clients develop a range of new, differentiated competencies that enable them to lead transformation initiatives in their organisations, and that are essential for sustainability in today's dynamic environment.

Our global team of experienced consultants, facilitators and certified coaches have broad business backgrounds and international experience in senior corporate roles. In particular, we are accredited in the work of the Coaches Training Institute (CTI) and the Center for Right Relationship (CRR) and we have studied with the Presencing Institute.

PresenceAtWork's principal offices are located in the Netherlands and Australia. Our partners are based in Singapore, Malaysia and the USA.



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