

'The gap between the people at the top and the folks doing the actual work – in healthcare, in education, you name it – is enormous,' De Blok tells me when I visit his office in Almelo. 'Managers tend to band together. They set up all kinds of courses and conferences where they tell each other they're doing things right.'

That cuts them off from the real world. 'There's this notion that doers can't think strategically,' De Blok continues. 'That they lack vision. But the people out doing the work are brimming with ideas. They come up with a thousand things, but don't get heard, because managers think they have to go on some corporate retreat to dream up plans to present to the worker bees.'

De Blok has a very different take on things. He sees his employees as intrinsically motivated professionals and experts on how their jobs ought to be done. 'In my experience, managers tend to have very few ideas. They get their jobs because they fit into a system, because they follow orders. Not because they're big visionaries. They take some "high-performance leadership" courses and suddenly think they're a game changer, an innovator.'

When I point out to de Blok that 'healthcare manager' was the fastest-growing occupational group in the Netherlands in the years 1996–2014, he heaves a sigh.<sup>18</sup>

'What you get with all these MBA programmes is people convinced they've learned a convenient way to order the world. You have HR, finance, IT. Eventually, you start believing that a lot of what your organisation is accomplishing is down to you. You see it with loads of managers. But subtract management and the work continues as before – or even better.'

As statements like this testify, de Blok tends to swim against the tide.

He's a manager who prefers not to manage. A CEO with hands-on experience. An anarchist at the top of the ladder. So as care became a product and patients became customers, De Blok decided to give up his management job and start something new. He dreamed of an oasis in this vast bureaucratic wasteland, a place fuelled not by market forces and growth, but by small teams and trust.

Buurtzorg started out with one team of four nurses in Enschede, a Dutch city of 150,000 on the country's eastern fringes. Today, it numbers more than eight hundred teams active nationwide. However, it's not what the organisation is, but what it is *not*, that sets Buurtzorg apart. It has no managers, no call centre and no planners. There are no targets or bonuses. Overheads are negligible and so is time spent in meetings. Buurtzorg doesn't have a flashy HQ in the capital, but occupies an uninspiring block in an ugly business park in outlying Almelo.

Each team of twelve has maximum autonomy. Teams plan their own schedules and employ their own co-workers. And, unlike the rest of the country's infinitely scripted care industry, the teams don't supply code H126 ('Personal Care'), code H127 ('Additional Personal Care'), code H120 ('Special Personal Care'), or code H136 ('Supplemental Remote Personal Care'). No, Buurtzorg supplies just one thing: care. In the exhaustive 'Product Book' of 'Care Products' defined by insurers, Buurtzorg now has its very own code: R002 – 'Buurtzorg'.

For the rest, the organisation has an intranet site where colleagues can pool their knowledge and experience. Each team has its own training budget, and each group of fifty teams has a coach they can call in if they get stuck. Finally, there's the main office which takes care of the financial side of things.

And that's it. With this simple formula, Buurtzorg has been proclaimed the country's 'Best Employer' five times, despite having no HR team, and won an award for 'Best Marketing

in the Care Sector', despite having no marketing department. 'Employee and client satisfaction is phenomenally high,' concluded one consultant at KPMG. 'Though costing only slightly less than the average, their quality of care clearly exceeds the average.'<sup>19</sup>

That's right, Buurtzorg is better for patients, nicer for employees and cheaper for taxpayers. A win-win-win situation. Meanwhile, the organisation continues to grow. Every month, dozens of nurses leave other jobs to sign on with Buurtzorg. And no wonder: it gives them more freedom and more pay. When Buurtzorg recently acquired part of a bankrupt counterpart, de Blok announced: 'The first thing we're going to do is raise staff salaries.'<sup>20</sup>

Don't get me wrong: Buurtzorg isn't perfect. There are disagreements, things go awry – really, they're almost human. And the organisational structure is, if anything, old-fashioned, with de Blok's aim always having been a return to Holland's uncomplicated domestic healthcare services of the 1980s.

But the bottom line is that what Jos de Blok started back in 2006 is nothing short of extraordinary. You might say his organisation combines the best of left and right, spending taxpayer money on the delivery of small-scale care by independent practitioners.

De Blok sums up his philosophy like this: 'It's easy to make things hard, but hard to make them easy.' The record clearly shows that managers prefer the complicated. 'Because that makes your job more interesting,' de Blok explains. 'That lets you say: See, you need me to master that complexity.'

Could it be that's also driving a big part of our so-called 'knowledge economy'? That pedigree managers and consultants make simple things as complicated as possible so we will need them to steer us through all the complexity? Sometimes I secretly

think this is the revenue model of not only Wall Street bankers but also postmodern philosophers peddling incomprehensible jargon. Both make simple things impossibly complex.

Jos de Blok does the opposite: he opts for simplicity. While healthcare conferences feature highly paid trend-watchers auguring disruption and innovation, he believes it's more important to preserve what works. 'The world benefits more from continuity than from continual change,' he asserts. 'Now they've got change managers, change agents, and so forth, but when I look at actual care in the community, the job has scarcely changed in thirty years. You need to build a relationship with someone in a tough situation; that's a constant. Sure, you may add some new insights and techniques, but the basics haven't changed.'

What does need to change, De Blok will tell you, is the care *system*. In recent decades, healthcare has been colonised by lawyers. 'Now you're in opposing camps. One side sells, the other buys. Just last week I was at a hospital where they told me: *We have our own sales team now*. It's crazy! We have hospitals with commercial departments and procurement teams, all staffing people with no background in healthcare at all. One buys, the other sells, and neither have a clue what it's all about.'

All the while, the bureaucracy keeps proliferating, because when you turn healthcare into a market, you end up with piles of paperwork. 'Nobody trusts anybody else, so they start building in all these safeguards; all kinds of checks that result in a ton of red tape. It's downright absurd,' says De Blok. 'The number of consultants and administrators at insurance companies is growing, while the number of actual caregivers continues to shrink.'

De Blok advocates a radically different approach to healthcare funding. Scrap the product mentality, he says. Make care central again. Drastically simplify the costs. 'The simpler the billing,

the greater the emphasis on actual care,' he explains. 'The more complicated the billing, the more players will search for loopholes in the system, increasingly tipping the balance towards accounting departments until they're the ones defining care.'

Talking to Jos de Blok, it soon becomes clear that his lessons go beyond the care sector. They apply to other areas, too: to education and law enforcement, to government and industry.

A great example is FAVI, a French firm that supplies car parts. When Jean-François Zobrist was appointed its new CEO in 1983, FAVI had a rigid hierarchy structure and still did things the old-fashioned way. Work hard, you'll get a bonus. Clock in late, your wages will be docked.

From day one, Zobrist imagined an organisation in which not he, but his staff made the decisions. Where employees felt it their duty to arrive on time (and where you could be certain that if they didn't, they had a good reason). 'I dreamed of a place,' Zobrist recounted later, 'that everyone would treat like home. Nothing more, nothing less.'<sup>21</sup>

His first act as CEO was to brick up the huge window that let management keep an eye on the whole shop floor. Next he binned the time clock, had the locks taken off the storage rooms and axed the bonus system. Zobrist split the company into 'mini-factories' of twenty-five to thirty employees and had them each choose their own team leader. To these he gave free rein to make all their own decisions: on wages, working hours, who to hire, and all the rest. Each team answered directly to their customers.

Zobrist also decided not to replace the firm's old managers when they retired, and cut out the HR, planning and marketing departments. FAVI switched to a 'reverse delegation' method of working, in which teams did everything on their own, unless they themselves wanted to call in management.

This may sound like the recipe for a money-guzzling hippy commune, but in fact productivity at FAVI went up. The company workforce expanded from one hundred to five hundred and it went on to conquer 50 per cent of the market for transmission forks. Average production times for key parts dropped from eleven days to just one. And while competitors were forced to relocate operations to low-wage countries, the FAVI plant stayed put in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

All that time, Zobrist's philosophy was dead simple. If you treat employees as if they are responsible and reliable, they will be. He even wrote a book about it, subtitled: *L'entreprise qui croit que l'homme est bon*. Translation: 'The company that believes people are good.'

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Companies like Buurtzorg and FAVI are proof that everything changes when you exchange suspicion for a more positive view of human nature.

Skill and competence become the leading values, not revenue or productivity. Just imagine what this would mean in other jobs and professions. CEOs would take the helm out of faith in their companies, academics would burn the midnight oil out of a thirst for knowledge, teachers would teach because they feel responsible for their students, psychologists would treat only as long as their patients require and bankers would derive satisfaction from the services they render.

Of course, there are already scores of teachers and bankers, academics and managers who are passionately motivated to help others. Not, however, *because* of the labyrinths of targets, rules, and procedures, but *despite* them.