

Transcript of the Unbossing Podcast with Paul Van Oyen - CEO Etex



Transcript Info

This is the transcript of the Hifluence unbossing podcast with Paul Van Oyen (PVO), CEO at ETEX, hosted by Nick Van Langendonck (NVL) and Thomas Hubbuch (TH) from Hifluence (www.hifluence.eu).

Parts of the spoken text have been edited to make the reading of this document more enjoyable. Become inspired and inspire others with it!

The podcast can also be listened to on [spotify](#)

Introductory thought From Paul Van Oyen

PVO: There are a couple of lessons that constantly resonate and that I took from my education. One of them is about the species that we call homo sapiens, and people have written thick books about them. It is not my intention to talk about this here, but one of the laws we study is that fast-evolving species tend to disappear very fast.

Species on earth that do not evolve and that are still looking like hundreds of millions of years ago, finding their intelligence through collaboration, still have millions of years to go. I think that is a fascinating idea to help put everything you do in a relative context and suddenly it makes you a little bit more important than you thought you are and for me that was a good basic training.

THH: Paul, are you talking now about a message of putting things in perspective? Or are you also giving a message in terms of adaptability?

PVO: I am putting a message in a bigger time horizon, which means that as much as we can be fanatical about what we are going to do today, there is a day after today, and then another day, etc. in such a way that we do not have to force ourselves into positions of delivering, because there are bigger things around us. It makes you humble, and it makes you very much 'unfinished'.

In the story of ETEX you will see that being unfinished is a key criterion. You at Hifluence are talking about unbossing and I am talking about unfinished years. Sometimes we think we are very important, and we matter. I will come back to that when we dig into the leadership projects.

The Story of being unfinished

PVO: I joined Etex 31 years ago and took all kinds of crazy tasks. I quickly had the reputation of the one to push, who would never say 'no' and every two to three years they came to me with very crazy ideas: "Are you willing to develop Eastern Europe, "I have never been there but yes why not". Instead of saying "Why me", I always said, "why not?" That was the right attitude for an interesting career.

"We do not have to force ourselves into positions of delivering, because there are bigger things around us. It makes you humble, and it makes you very much unfinished"

THH: Were those 'mission impossible' roles, with high risk of not achieving the goal?

PVO: Not for me, because I am an adventurer. Geologists are adventurers. Many people have considered some of these moves as career threatening. I have never considered any type of career path. I have done quite some job rotations as they call them, where I would come home very excited about a new task, but with no salary increase, which I found more than normal. The capacity of saying, "why not?", is again a symptom of curiosity and they were interesting for my career.

THH: These missions were far from the headquarters, yes?

PVO: Some of them were far from headquarters, but also a couple of years in R&D and projects, where I was asked to look at the business processes and re-engineer them. We are talking about the late 90s, with business process reengineering, associated with ERP systems and so on. In the Etex of 1999, that was almost like suicide. This was a mission that was strictly unwanted. Welcomed by none of the Managing Directors, the so-called MDs, but I found that super exciting.

THH: The so-called MD's, I love it! Which leadership style did you develop with your team during these missions?

PVO: The first thing is curiosity. The second thing was a very important one as I quickly found out that there are not so many things that I needed to decide.

Ten, maybe twenty years ago, I would have said:

“From the 10 things that I have to decide every day, maybe I should only decide five. Seven years ago, I would have said that from the ten things that I have to decide, maybe there is only one I must decide, and then I would concentrate my day on finding out which is one that was”

Now, getting older, reaching the age of maturity, I do not think I have to decide. I will steer and make sure that we are on track, but that is about it. I will make the destination clear, I will put the fuel on the engine, but it is a symptom of something broken or wrong in an organization when decisions arrive on my desk.

I can challenge decisions, I can make sure they happen and are taken. What you call unbossing is a lot to do with decision making and putting it in the right place. Unbossing is saying, “I don't probably have to be the boss, but then, where is the decision taken? and how is the decision taken? There needs to be an alternative for being not bossed.

What does it mean to be an unbossed leader?

THH: Before Nick comes up with it, I do recognize myself a little bit in your journey when you say that a couple of years ago, I felt a certain number of decisions should still be taken by me, not all, that is for sure, maybe I should only take half. Today, you are on an unbossed extreme where you say, “why should that be me?”. Paul, how did you come to this realization, were there certain moments where you made the 'click' and said, “come on guys, this is not the way to do it”? The second question is: How did your team react to that? Did they not say: “Paul, you have to make the decision, please!”. How was that?

PVO: Well, the first question, how did I gain that insight and I could talk about the many times that I had to call upon change management, because the things I would have decided just did not happen.

The main reason why you want to do that, on a very pragmatic level, is that if others decide, then it is already solved, because the buy-in is there. In those circumstances the buy-in and the change management make it happen.

But that is not the real answer. The real answer is much more humanistic, much more people oriented. I think in the leadership journeys that I have either gone through myself or seen in action, there is often a turning point where leaders, who obviously as all of us did in their career, focus on volumes, management and deliverables. This is exactly the opposite from what we are talking about here.

There is a moment in time when the insight grows that it is basically not about me. My life is not about me, the world is not about me, the ship is not about me. It is about the others, because without the others, there is no victory. That is a very difficult point in time, because the managerial experiences, the careers and the company cultures cultivate the opposite.

The appraisal system, remember, it was all about me, and then quickly after, me against the others. It was not just about me; it is about winning. Winning is okay, but not as the opposite of losing. I would say that it is a deeply humanistic vision, that when it is not about me, it is about the other. That is what matters!

“If you want to unboss your organization, you need to have a very genuine, deeply rooted humanistic vision, for others to have an impact, for others to develop, etc.”

In that context there is no more choice. I have never discussed leadership principles. I could not, out of my deepest humanistic vision, possibly choose and I did not have to choose, it is totally impossible. The more I see the world evolve in the 21st century, the more comfortable I feel. In the beginning it was a little uncomfortable that I thought I was probably wrong because that was not what I saw around me. Now, it couldn't care less as I was on a mission, this is what the world needs. That is not the leadership of me or my company, it is the leadership that the world desperately needs in the 21st century.

THH: Quickly to Nick, because I know how much Nick is enjoying what you have been saying in the last couple of minutes. It is pure Hifluence spirit. Am I right, Nick?

NVL: Yes, and I do not want to say too much guys, because I am enjoying the flow between the two of you. All I want to say is that the tagline, purpose of Hifluence is 'helping society create the organizations and leaders it needs', and that is basically the summary of what Paul also said, being on a mission, not because of us, but because the world desperately needs it.

The Etex Unbossing Journey

THH: You have a clear message, as I understood it, the moment you let go of your own ego, you come to that realization. What interests me now is that you are talking about a company in the 1990s and the first 10 years of this century, how did your team and how did your environment react to that? How did it react to this realization and to your behavior? You were clearly unbossed, was your environment also already unbossed?

PVO: No, but the nice thing about a company like Etex is that it is our company. Etex is a family-owned company where the family is not in the management, they are very committed for the long term, and this committed relationship is very much in line with doing good.

One of the reasons I say this is that we were producers of asbestos cement, and this left us with a big trauma in the organization. We thought we were doing good, that we were bringing good materials and products to market, used everywhere in the world, very democratic and very accessible. And then we woke-up in a nightmare and the whole organization felt we had a debt to society. Rather than seeing that as a heavy burden on our shoulders, we could reverse it. We could stand up with pride and say, "look we can't change the past, we can take care of it, and we are going to build a fantastic future. We are a company that has a reason to exist".

'Inspiring Ways of Living' (our purpose) is 15 years old. And we had workshops, with corporate branding gurus, you know, to find out what kind of animal you are... We did however not understand this 'Inspiring Ways of Living'. For more than 10 years, we talked about it, but we did not understand the power of it. Someone once told me that:

"If you think you have a purpose, then check, because millions of people should be interested"

And indeed, there are billions of people who need better places to live, to work and since we do not provide food, we can provide shelter. So, it is a fantastic purpose. It is rock solid and totally justified.

To answer your question more, you must be clean as a company to experience that. What you also need is shareholders and a good relationship with the chairman of the board. They, fortunately, have a different time horizon. They do not look at the quarterly results, and then up to the next quarter, etc. Such a long-term focus brings a wealth of opportunity. I can tell you; we do create an awful lot of value for them.

Breaking through the permafrost

PVO: The team was indeed a true challenge, that is absolutely true for us. It took me three years to build a team of people around me, who would have the same deeply rooted beliefs engine, and I am talking beyond values and talking about the things that you cannot negotiate and for which you do not have to do workshops. Once I found that, everything was a joy. It was not finished with the team, because spreading a message like that, and

you unbossing guys must have experience with, you face what we call in our house, the permafrost.

“At some point you face the issue of the permafrost, which is the layer in the organization where apparently the messages do not go through”

You think you do a fantastic job with your team, and you think you have inspired 15,000 people and you really only inspired 70 or 80, then you have reached the permafrost, then you must melt the ice and we developed a lot of tools and actions and activities to melt the ice. The ice was easier to melt bottom-up than top-down. Holes in the permafrost started to emerge from the bottom, not the top. There are people for whom this was energizing.

“I learned one thing, this kind of leadership is not to be preached, you must experience it”

I have just finished my first book and I arrived at page 3 which says, “it's a leadership to experience, not to teach” so the book was finished after three pages, and it is probably not even worth publishing.

It is about the animation around it and the language used in it and giving people the opportunity of experiencing it, because they must do the same. It does not stop, it is nowhere, and it does not even stop at the edge of our company because it goes into the customer, and they take it back home. They apply it to the education of their children.

My wife always says, “you guys with your work-life balance”, what a nonsense, there is no work-life balance, there is only life. If you are talking about beliefs, I do not have beliefs for my job or beliefs for my task as a husband or a father, your beliefs should be one and the same, whether at work or at home

THH: You just said it took three years to melt, what you call the permafrost, what a brilliant expression! You know very well what the permafrost is, and you have given it several names. You were convinced of this unbossed leadership style, and I guess your close leadership team as well, and nevertheless, it took you three years to melt the ice? Just to let it sink in.

PVO: Yes, and if it does not take you three years, then it might maybe take four or five years, and that doesn't really matter, because you can only be loyal to a belief.

When they offered me the job of CEO, I refused the job for many months, because I did not see what it could add to my life. I was never born to be a CEO. I had fun in my previous jobs, and I had a good team around me. I was just very much afraid that, to take on the role of a CEO, I would have to play that role and playing a role is not something for me. I cannot do that. I know the big debates and books that have been written about authentic leadership and about the challenges these leaders face and solve.

Authentic leadership for me is all about, 'here I am, take it or leave it'. Authentic leadership is not saying "I have nothing to learn". I have a couple of good friends who told me:

"You don't have to play the role of a CEO; you find the CEO that is already inside of you"

Ever since, I tell my colleagues in the whole of the organization, 15.000 people in total, that I am not the CEO, but that I am becoming the CEO. Maybe one day I will be...

THH: Then you are not speaking about the CEO of how people used to know a CEO 10 or 20 years ago, you are talking about becoming something which should be the leader of the 21st century, as you see it. Now, Paul, I must come back on that. You start this journey with full trust from the shareholders, which is fantastic. You first even refused the job and they had to convince you. I guess you also had the clear condition that you would do it in a way you think that is right?

PVO: I do not want to make it sound too 'rosy'. Seven years ago, I would probably not have been able to explain my vision as I do today. Being a CEO is not a project. A project brings you from A to B. In today's world, by the time you made it to B, you realize that you should have been in C. Of course, we have projects and we do have project management.

Everything we do in Etex is driven by what we call movement and not projects. We are in motion and maybe one day we will be in a flow. We are in a constant flow of change where all of this does not come as a burden anymore.

THH: From my point of view, the conditions under which you began this journey are very good. That is why I am talking about the support of shareholders, not hunting or chasing the quarterly figures, but having a long-term sustainable perspective. The purpose is there and defined, even if maybe not clear to everybody yet, but the purpose is defined.

I would like to come back to the permafrost. You said it took three years to melt the ice. You also said it came from the top and it went fully down, and then from down up again through the permafrost. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you managed the melting of the ice?

PVO: There are a couple of pillars, which are the normal pillars. First, there is extremely intensive communication, about listening and talking, and listening and talking.

“One of our leadership principles is about pause and reflect, and we do a lot of it!”

To give an example, with every single team member, at least once a year, I go on a one-day walking trip, one on one. We prepare for the day with some thoughts for each other and continue most of the day. When we come back to the office or to the car, we realize the day is over and we have not finished.

When you communicate, you must go deep into the communication, you must repeat your messages, you must develop a language that people recognize, we have that thirst and look for a common identity.

One Etex

PVO: Three years ago, I went to see the senior leaders at a leadership meeting and I told them, “I’m sure that in your deepest thoughts, you can imagine a better company, you must have a dream about it?” A better Etex. the Etex of our dreams. And on one wall, we posted the components of such a company and there was a lot referring to collaboration and having an impact and continuity. On the other wall, we said who would like to participate. And I found, of course, all 100 agree.

I said, okay, now you have the option either by engaging a big consultancy like McKinsey, and that is going to be a big cost cutting, you know, or we together rebuild that company, and we have time, we have two years, three years, we are going to look at the processes, we are going to look at what the market and the customer expects from us.

And we have developed a movement called ‘One Etex’, and I used to call it the indignados. (The people who are not happy and think we can do better) and we have built that new Etex with 350 volunteers who participated from every corner of the company with a minimum of consulting, but by looking at other companies and discussing and learning from each other.

We have completely redesigned the company, the processes, the organization, which is just the consequence, it doesn't really matter, because we are little by little less of an organization, we are more like an organism. And it is just fantastic. For example:

“For one year we have been running this company without a budget. The people themselves concluded that for better finance, they would like to work without a budget. That was like a nuclear bomb.”

THH: It is a real revolution, that is very clear! You have got rid of whole budgeting rounds and it is completely gone.

PVO: It is completely gone, and of course, we have something instead, which is 10 times better, and people love it because it is action-oriented, it is agile, it is fast, and it is manageable. The budget process was a nightmare, we estimated 100 FTEs were working on it from August, until... I benefited from the COVID period to say, “Hey, would you want to make a budget for 2021?” “No, we don't want to make a budget for 2021”, was the answer, and I can give you hundreds of such examples.

This is exactly what I mean with experiencing that kind of leadership, because when they do, they organize themselves, they went into workstreams, nobody was the boss, there was a sponsor or two sponsors, they had to learn from each other, they must present their findings, or we share a challenge, they had the power to decide... I remember people crying in the workshops, like, “Am I the one who can decide on ...?”, yes because I was not going to do it. We work in communities, which are a good mix between a formality and a program, with a high level of people involved. The nature of this company, and as the performance allowed us, there was no panic in the house ever, it was super rewarding.

As a direct consequence, we achieved a historically high performance in 2020. Of course, we lost some 5% of turnover, which was normal (in COVID times), but we have double the cash flow and the highest EBITDA and that is just the result.

Creating the context for unbossing

THH: It is the outcome; it is a result of all your actions. It is amazing. Paul, I would like to know, these management meetings where you have the top 100 people together, I guess you are still doing that on a yearly basis?

PVO: We work with an executive team of eight people. We have direct contact with 15 business leaders who we meet every month, for an hour and a half of exchange: What is on your mind? How did you proceed? Does that work? Why do we need to put emphasis? Do we reallocate resources?

From the 15 we go to 100 of the senior leaders whom we meet several times a year and we meet with the top 450 people four times a year.

THH: I would like to know, for when you compare these meetings with five years ago, to the meetings of today. Is there more open dialogue, to say it very clearly now, are your people also daring to challenge you? and some of your points of view?

PVO: Yes, it would be very bad if we would not feel it. You mentioned trust and you are familiar with the formula of trust, (empathy, authenticity and logic) there is a formula on trust which goes back to the 50s or the 60s. One of the big challenges is if you use empowerment, which is a word I do not like, instead we use contextual leadership more, e.g. the committee has worked for six months to find that one sentence about why the executive committee exists, what its contribution is.

“We only exist as an executive committee to create a context for people to develop and make a difference”

It is a very short sentence and that is why we exist! If you preach a leadership that uses command and control, which is as dead as it can be, it is used, it is worn, it is broken, it is gone, it is finished, and we must replace it. What we have noticed in our journey is that we were quite fast at leaving the 'command' behind. People are perfectly capable, when you put the story in a context, of filling in their own agenda.

“So, we left the command behind, however, many of us found it very difficult to leave the 'control' behind”

If you want to get rid of command and control, and you get stuck halfway, then you get chaos. When you say, “I trust you, you will do what you need to do, you will take full responsibility, contribute with whatever it takes, but I want to be fully informed, to be fully transparent... that is a killer.

In the formula of trust there is the element of intimacy, and some people think that if I empower you, I make a bigger distance between us, and the opposite is true, I am much closer to you by trusting you, but people must fill in what it means 'being close'. Being close is listening, being close is coaching, helping you. Being close is not telling you what to do. Not even asking you to report on that.

I have never ever in my life sent reminders. What happens if I must send and keep track of what I have asked you to do and whether you did it? ... What an interesting activity.

Staying truthful

THH: You just mentioned one huge mistake, which is letting go of the command on one side, but at the same time, not daring to let go of the control. Frankly speaking, we talk to CEOs daily who tell us: "we love the philosophy of unbossing, I would absolutely love to install it and to go on that journey together with my company, but I am scared that my team is not ready yet. I am scared that my team will not embrace it and still I want to.

If you put yourself in the shoes of such a CEO, with less experience than you, but listening to you and absolutely embracing your message, from your point of view, what would be the biggest mistake this CEO, without obviously wanting to make that mistake, could make?

PVO: The biggest mistake you can make is not being faithful to your own beliefs. What I am fanatic about is the purpose of the company, and I am not sure I can say that, it doesn't really matter. What matters is that I can contribute from my purpose, and each human being has a (personal) purpose.

If you are faithful to your own beliefs, you do not have to question it. You will do it, you will take the hurdles, and you will learn.

If you want to do unbossing because it is the latest hype, don't do it.

Do the necessary introspection, to see where you can develop yourself towards your beliefs.

I see all these workshops where companies develop their purpose and I wonder when they will do workshops to find the people's purpose, not to develop them, but to find them?

To invite this into the leadership team is very vulnerable and that is the only thing I can do, invite you. The daylight comes when I can say, "Wow, under that umbrella from this company, and with that purpose of this company, I can bring and be loyal to my purpose in life", because people are generally there to do good and to do well. In that sense, companies are extremely important, are a force in society, they take a stand.

"The company is a vehicle, and yes also a societal vehicle, that just brings people together around an activity and where those people can make tomorrow's world"

One of the slogans at Etex is "your life starts at 8AM", because if you wait until 6PM for your life to start, then I am a criminal because I am putting you in jail for 8 to 10 hours, and then I should probably go to jail myself.

It is unjustified to come to the office or the factory for 8 hours or more each day and do nothing interesting until you can go home and then have a meaningful life because, e.g., you are the Secretary to the volleyball club...

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At Hifluence, we have the great pleasure of supporting many leaders on their journey to unbossing themselves and their companies. With our in depth research and inspired by thought leaders across the globe (many of which you hear in our podcasts), we are at the forefront of advising companies to unboss (<https://thetealteam.com/full-teal-ahead>)

We have a vast amount of knowledge on how these journeys develop, increase the productivity and profitability of organizations, create unstoppable innovation, unleash the unique talents of companies and become magnets for young people.

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Contact nick.vanlangendonck@hifluence.eu or thomas.hubbuch@hifluence.eu!

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The Hifluence Unbossing Podcasts

This podcast is brought to you by Hifluence and is part of a series of unbossing podcasts.

[Hifluence](#) is a [pioneer](#) in unbossing organisations worldwide. It is our mission to inspire, guide and support leaders in shaping human-centred organisations. We focus on those who believe in customer obsession and the infinite potential of engaged employees, but do not know yet how to approach such a journey, where to start or how to scale.

About our podcast guest:

[Paul Van Oyen](#) has been CEO of Etex since 1 January 2015 and is also responsible for the industry division, Africa Region, Corporate Communications and Legal. He joined Etex in 1990 and enjoyed many different roles in which he was able to contribute to the growth of the Group. A mineralogist by formation, he enjoyed discovering the beauty of many different roles at Etex and making a mark as a man of the field, growing several parts of the business, optimizing operations as well as realizing important acquisitions. Above all, Paul is a self-aware leader who has enjoyed how people around him developed personally and how they too made their own contributions to the growth of Etex.

About our podcast hosts:

[Nick Van Langendonck](#) is a force of nature when it comes to inspiring and motivating leaders, teams and organizations. the founder of [Hifluence](#), a consultancy firm specialized in unbossing organizations and liberating potential. He is also co-founder of Pebble, an incubator and investor for unbossed SME's. He is also a guest lecturer at the University of Antwerp and Antwerp Management School. (nick.vanlangendonck@hifluence.eu)

[Thomas Hubbuch](#) looks back at a successful career of 14 years as CEO of Sucre Tirlemont, Thomas achieved outstanding performance together with his team of 1000 people: development of an international sales success with Belgian sugar specialities and the creation of the world's most technically advanced bio-ethanol refinery. Sucre Tirelemont was voted Belgian's company with the best reputation! Liberating the full potential of his teams was the major ingredient of all these successes. This made Thomas a dedicated Unbossing, joining the Influence movement as a partner with all his mind and heart! (thomas.hubbuch@hifluence.eu)

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