

Transcript of the Unbossing Podcast with
Ank De Wilde, co-founder & CEO Absolém Engineers



THE
UNBOSSING
PODCAST

Transcript Info

This is the transcript of the Hifluence unbossing podcast with Ank De Wilde (ADW), Co-founder and CEO of Absolem Engineers, 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](#)

Building a purpose driven engineering company

THH: Ank, when we look at your story, we see quite some surprising, and I would even say sensational elements. You are leading an engineering company of 70 people and you clearly lead this company aligned by culture and purpose. I have seen many CEOs of engineering companies in my life, but two things I have never seen: I have never seen a female CEO of an engineering company and, for sure, I have never seen a CEO of an engineering company talking to me about purpose and culture. Already, that makes you a sensation.

This brings me to my first question, when you started on this journey, towards a company which is led by purpose and culture, how did that echo? How was the immediate reaction of your people? Were they all embracing it saying, 'Yes, Ank, that is where we wanted to go anyway, or were there a lot of reactions saying, 'Come on Ank, we are an engineering company, can you please stop that talk and can we get back to normal again? How was that?

ADW: You make me smile! I love this question and I smile because for me, the word sensation does not feel like sensational. When you are in the midst of things, and I can imagine you can also talk about that from that perspective, it does not feel like that at all, especially in leading a company. It is also the hard work, the rumble, the difficult conversations, the long road to a goal far ahead. It is building something for the long run.

Thank you for framing me like that because you do talk about things which are about femininity and female leadership, and I really want to address this in leading a purpose led company. For me, there is not any achievement yet. That is where I feel, as to the sensational part of it, it is not yet really an achievement or otherwise said, I am still on the road to somewhere. It is an ongoing process that started from day one. But there was not a certain moment where I explained this big plan to everybody and a moment when we started it. It started to grow and has been part of my DNA from the start to build a people centric and human centric, value driven company, which from the beginning was only a small company. The realization also grows that there were a lot of roadblocks on the way. When talking about that, I think we also have to talk about the bigger context and about the society we live in, the norms that we have, and for me, they all come together. I often ask myself how it was possible to instill this.

People are the entrance door

For me, people are the entrance door and if you see it like that, it is just a conversational thing:

We are all human beings, not human doings, so inviting people with their whole self to the company was something we intended from the beginning and that is where it all starts.

It is about going into contact with another human being and starting from there. It is about working towards a shared goal and talking about who you are and who I am, and where we are going together.

That is the purpose we are talking about. A purpose led company is also about working on something bigger than ourselves and in the old economic ideas, most companies are not really talking about purpose yet, it is still something in the margin, nevertheless it is starting to get bigger. Working on some goals that are beyond our economic goals is something that we, at Absolem, did from the beginning. It is all about creating entrepreneurship.

Leadership is about creating something, and I want to add something to the world, so it is really my own personal purpose that is also in the DNA, in our company's purpose. For me, it is about making the world a better place for my children to live in, even before I had children. It is about empathy, also intergenerational empathy, to add something that is valuable, it is about supporting a bigger goal and contributing something to society.

Purpose as a guiding principle

THH: I love it when you say that you are motivated to leave your children a better world than the one we entered into when we were kids! Will it make the world a better place? Is that a question you take with you into concrete projects and in what you are doing for your customers, or is that part of your company only about saving money for your customers or about growing your margin?

NVL: To frame this question slightly differently, how do you use this as a benchmark for decision making in your company? A lot of our listeners and the leaders we support ask us, we have this nice slogan of our purpose on the wall, but how do you translate that into concrete actions so that everybody in the company, whether it is contributing or not to that purpose, works to that higher goal?

Human doing & human being

ADW: That is a difficult question and that is also what I meant with achievement. Is everyone in Absolem really purpose driven and aligned to that evolutionary goal, this purpose thinking? I do not think so and that is also OK. But for me, as CEO of Absalom, in our goal setting, in our strategic ambitions, I want to integrate that. Where does it start? You can go inwards into the organization, into the structure, into the conversations, into the people and into the culture? It is also going outwards, with adding something to society or to bigger goals. For me it does not start, it is there, and you can address it.

NVL: What you are saying is, I try to be a role model and, in every conversation, every decision and every goal I set, I bring in the perspective of purpose. With that you hope other people in the company will be inspired by the role model and try, one way or the other, to adopt it and make it their own.

ADW: I bring in the concept of human centricity in every conversation because in our company we work together and as is the case in every company, it is all about people.

*It is not only about bringing in purpose,
but more about bringing in the value of
the 'U' and the 'I' and the strong 'US'.*

NVL: There is a great book written about this by Paul van Schaik, 'We is more important than Why'. He helped the Dutch railway organization transform. (Do listen to this unbossing podcast also). I do have another follow-up question.

You triggered me because I often use the words human doing and human being and you talk about human centricity. That is what you bring into the organization and the question is, how far do you go in terms of bringing your whole self? Where is the border for you? Is there an area where you say, here it stops; or does it go all the way, where people bring themselves and also all of their fears, insecurities, maybe even trauma to work? How far do you go?

ADW: We go all the way and I like to build that in structurally, nevertheless:

When you talk about bringing your whole self to work, you cannot set boundaries and start excluding things.

We are working with the principles of sociocracy 3.0. That means that we are working towards shared goals and work with organizational drivers and thus we invite people to bring their emotions, their needs, and to bring them in the form of a request. We like to work with drivers, and we invite people to formulate them. These are questions like, what do they need and the positive impact they want to reach. If that is something that the team wants to reach, then we can work on that together, and then that makes it an organizational driver or an organizational request. That is the goal, we want to work efficiently together and that does not exclude one thing or the other.

If you exclude the feeling, you also take out the compass, because our feelings are such a good way of seeing what is going on, it is a huge amount of data and it is an intelligence we need to use.

That human intelligence I want to structurally invite in, all the time. That means that we try to invite people to do self-reflection and we support that process. It is a new way of thinking.

Now I will try to answer your question. It brings a lot of things on the table that were previously also there, but not named. I really believe these dynamics are steering people and companies, and they have always done so. The old economic thinking, where everything needs to be all rational and linear, was an illusion.

When we include the emotion, it brings a lot of messiness, a lot of new responsibilities to companies, a lot of new responsibilities for people managers, for colleagues to be able to receive others as well.

It needs a whole new skill set that has not been reached yet. We have not been raised like that. So that is what I mean, when I am talking about societal norms. It was not taught at school. It was not taught at university, and it means a lot of new work and new responsibilities.

The opportunities are gigantic because this is where the heart of creativity, innovation and transformation lies (a lot of research has been done on this) and it is my hope and my belief that we can reach that. So, if we want to invite that, then we have to invite the other things as well and we have to find ways to work with them. I am on my way, into that process, and this week especially, it has been a week of vulnerability. That is also part of the experience.

*There are hard conversations and if you allow these,
when you accept them,
if you can really be in the conversation and do not take things too personal,
really listen and stay connected with each other in the conversation,
then you really feel the energy flow again.*

THH: You are talking about internal conversations inside the company.
Do you also have hard conversations with customers, suppliers and business partners?
Do these tough conversations only take place inside the company?

ADW: It does not include the external conversations, for us it is important, so we talk about. Eternally we try to talk about it inspirationally. Sometimes customers come close to what for us are unacceptable boundaries.

For example, if one of our consultants is working on a project where the customer does not respect a sane or healthy workplace, then we prefer not to work for that customer. We do take those decisions. We have not experienced many problems in that area, because through conversation, it is always possible to find solutions. Maybe we have been lucky.

There have been some hiccups on the roads and there have been exceptions, but in general this has been received quite positively. In the future, we would like to talk more about sustainability, inwards as well as outwards. It is growing, it is expanding, and we move ahead step by step and with a little organic growth as well.

No shine without friction

NVL: You mentioned a couple of times that you have the feeling that you are not there yet and that you are still in the process. There is a famous quote and insight, which is about enjoying the process and I assume you are also doing that.

What is it that you have experienced before that makes you have that personal drive, that personal energy whenever the going gets tough? What is your happy place? Which memory from the past helps you in finding renewed energy for when the going gets stuff?

ADW: I am enjoying the process, but when the going gets tough, I really fall back on my personal purpose. All in all:

Making a change is not easy, transformation is tough.

No shine without friction

When it is tough, I ask myself how can I grow?

It is about self-reflection. What does it challenge within me?

What is my learning process?

For me it is really about going inwards and

finding peace in the hardship,

because it is a part of it and that is also ok.

This is all part of the process, and it is important for me to take these things internally. It is not okay if it is only about the hard times and just accepting the difficult parts. It is not about living to the illusion that it does not work in engineering or does not fit the old economic way of looking at things. If there is a problem, it means that it is not going well and that we have to adapt everything. If it is not okay, we are not there yet. This is what we are working with. I find comfort in that, but I have noticed that for some people, it does not sound comforting.

Leading from the not knowing!

NVL: This is self-aware leadership.

THH: I fully agree! I would also like to go back to past encounters with other CEOs of engineering companies. These are people that think they have to know everything. In other words, every employee could come to them, in the middle of night, with a technical question, which they want to discuss, and they want to know, do I go left, middle, or right. These CEOs see their job as telling their people exactly how they want them to do it.

Now, when I see you talking about culture, when I listen to you talking about how deeply you care, how the interactions are inside the company, I imagine you are not that type of CEO who has to know every little detail, and who has to tell everybody exactly how to do their job. Am I right?

ADW: You are right! I try to lead from the complete opposite.

I lead from the 'not knowing'. I like to question things, and this is the vulnerability I also want to share with everybody.

I started a company, and I am an entrepreneur, but I was not formed to be a good leader. For me, it is also a road towards something. It is about discovering, growing every day and not ever being there.

I would also like to come back to your first question, where purpose, sustainability, agile, human centric, feminine, all those terms, come together. These are the new words, the hyped words, but for me:

... it is about the new leadership, the new way of thinking and it is about adding softness, it is not about going away from something, it is about taking the good things from the old system and adding another layer.

This is a big search for me. Defining that is also part of the purpose and creating and shaping a company whilst at the same time still trying to lead a company with an economic vision, and not letting growth be the only goal.

THH: Were you able to employ and bring together the team which you have today, as you wanted it, and are all these people on the same page with you in terms of culture? Do all these people have this mindset? You said you were meeting roadblocks, are there still roadblocks today?

Are people still saying, no that goes too far, we should not be dreamers? I am not yet fully convinced. Or is it kind of like a dream becoming reality? You built your team, and everybody now says yes, that is it, self-aware leadership, we are all mindful and I bring my full emotions into it.

ADW: Well, it is everything that you said. There were all those misconceptions and not everybody is the same, because everybody joined us at another moment and from another place and we are all unique individuals. So, it is never the same for everybody.

*It is impossible to go find people who are where I am,
and that is not my goal either.*

We work with the people that we have and that is an eclectic combination of people who are really like minded, are self-aware, and also people who are not like anyone else, people that do not have the same values, or maybe do have the same values, but are not applying them as passionately, there are younger people and older, etc. Every company has people with such diverse backgrounds.

Sometimes people call me a dreamer and yes, I am a dreamer, but I am also building something. I am really determined, not impulsive and take it step by step. As we grow, I try to include people in this way of thinking. When building a company with a culture like ours, there is a big challenge because you also want to build a company where it is not only about culture, but also about delivering value and making money.

I was talking about new skills before, people have not learned those new skills so as a company we have to take our responsibility in developing them. If we want to work in the way we want, it also takes a little bit of training, it takes accountability, we have to try to speak the same language.

Taking the people with us requires continuous attention.

In talent management it is not only about finding the good engineering degrees, but also about training people in e.g., non-violent communication, personal productivity, mental health, etc. all these new skills, we also need to master them ourselves and keep doing that over and over again. It becomes part of the onboarding process where people who are more experienced with it, onboard other people, etc.

We are still in the growing-up phase as a company and that is what I meant when I said, we have not achieved it yet, and are still very much working on it, always including everybody and starting over again.

Last year, we had a lot of difficulties in organizing training as we onboarded a lot of new people. Due to Covid, I can see there is a mental toll waiting for us. Everybody is tired emotionally, mentally, with the lack of social contact, isolation and the scatteredness of it all. I am not going to continue working like we were working in the past, but working with what is happening now, and still aligning this to our goal and working with the people that are around us now. That is contextual for me, it is always situational.

The reality of being unfinished

THH: Just to make sure we cherish it. Ank has given us another present with this fantastic sentence 'leading from the not knowing' and I hear it today for the first time and I love this sentence.

NVL: It triggers me in an incredibly positive way because I practice the art of not knowing from a spiritual perspective and it is one of my main sources of inspiration. That combined with 'human being and human doing', you are scoring points! In a leadership and from a professional context, I am falling in love with what you said.

Time for the 'spoiler alert'! You were talking about being in the process and that you have not achieved anything yet. Paul Van Oyen, CEO of Etex, was a guest in our Unbossing Podcast recently. Etex is an organization of 14.000 people and has been in existence for many years. One of the key words he used in that podcast was 'unfinished'. Paul is a geologist, and he studied the evolution of the earth. When he looked at it from that perspective, nothing is ever finished. It is always unfinished.

ADW: I love that because that is what it is all about:

*It is never finished and that is where the joy is.
If you can accept that, then everything is OK!*

When you feel the calling, it is important to start

NVL: I would love to never finish this conversation. But there is also the reality that we have to, at some point, wrap-up, so Thomas, it is time to ask your famous last question to Anke.

THH: Ank, Imagine I am the CEO of a very traditional engineering company. I listen to this podcast. I have 200 people on my payroll, and I am very much a command and control boss. My people come to me and ask me questions. I tell them how to do that.

You have convinced me of this vision of a different and purpose driven culture and you have especially convinced me with the sentence, leading by not knowing, which means not having the answers to everything. I also want to introduce this culture in my company. I am convinced! From your point of view, please tell me what is the biggest mistake I could make and screw-up, to not succeed, despite all my good intentions?

ADW: That is such a difficult question, I would like to answer it philosophically and maybe that is not the answer that you are looking for.

*I do not believe in one big mistake that can ruin everything.
Just start when you feel the calling,
just start with it and then there are no 'biggest mistakes'.
There will be mistakes, accept them as part of the process and
try to learn from them and take it from there.*

NVL: You hit the nail on its head about the biggest mistake: when you feel the call, and do not start and act on it.

ADW: Thank you for that reflection. Acting on the call is so important. What I wanted to say with regards to the biggest mistake was to not start it and to not see it from a human centric point of view or not from a systemic long-term thinking point of view. If you want to start and if you want to make it concrete, there is no need to make it philosophical, make it a reflection or a way of thinking. The most important thing is to start!

NVL: Remember the last words of Paul Van Oyen who said, when you feel the calling and when you believe there is no challenge that you will not be able to tackle, you just have to believe in yourself and have the faith and I see some similarity here. It is a great message to end the show.

*When you feel the call, start acting upon it and
you will work your way through it.
Do not be afraid, do not be scared!*

ADW: Yeah. So true!

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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>)

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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:

[Ank De Wilde](#) is the Co-founder and CEO of [Absolem](#), which she took over with a management-buy-out from the engineering arm of Altran a bit more than 20 years ago. Today the company has around 70 people and operates out of Belgium. Since she took over the company, she worked tirelessly to develop Absolem into a purpose driven and human centric organization that connects people with themselves, others and the innovation power of technology. Ank is an entrepreneur, but above all a self-conscious leader, bringing softness and a feminine perspective into the world of engineering.

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 Unbossed, joining the Influence movement as a partner with all his mind and heart! (thomas.hubbuch@hifluence.eu)

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