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Tex Gunning

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Camunico in conversation with Tex Gunning, on leadership, culture and the importance of growing people.

We meet Tex Gunning in his office, on the 10th floor of the AkzoNobel building located in the heart of Amsterdam's financial district, the 'Zuid-As'. It's a rather small and modest office for such a large building. Together with Tex we have a look at the stunning view, which he playfully describes as 'Madurodam': we are so high up that the trains and the cars look like toys. This early in the morning, the sky is coloured by the rising sun.

Tex Gunning studied Economics at Erasmus University in Rotterdam and started his career at Unilever, where he worked for 25 years and where his last position was that of Business Group President Asia Foods. In 2009 Tex joined the board of management at AkzoNobel, where he's in charge of the Decorative Paints division. Also, he advises managers and academics all over the world about leadership and corporate social responsibility. During all his years of working and living in Asia, he learned a great deal about poverty and pollution. Seeing this made him realise the importance of a cleaner environment and think about the possibilities for companies to contribute. Camunico talks to Tex about the importance of growing people and about being inspired by literature as well as other cultures.

If individuals can make the world a better place, so can large companies

"Seeing what some individuals and small companies achieve in this world, motivates me to think of ways in which we can all contribute. CNN Heroes for example, is an inspiring programme. It shows individuals who are able to achieve great things, for example a woman in Malawi who manages to mobilise feminism in her village, and a man addressing slavery issues through CNN. All on their own, without any help from large companies or institutions. Considering big companies have significantly more financial and human resources, there are many opportunities to make an effort. Over the past decade I've been putting a lot of time in spreading this belief, by trying to convince leaders of large companies to not only use their resources to make more profit but inspire people and use part of the profit to make the world a better place. Big companies have a much bigger possibility to contribute positively to the world than small individuals."

Challenge

"The main problem is that the three players, companies, governments, NGOs and non-profits, don't collaborate enough in creating a relevant social agenda.

All parties do their own thing and believe that some invisible hand will bring it all together. But there is no invisible hand. We should talk to each other, define what the social and environmental needs are and all feel responsible to act in a sustainable way.

The second issue is that profit is the number one goal in every company; profit is the guiding principle for all decisions that are made. But it's really not only about short-term goals and money in this world; companies need to think about their position within society as well. When I try to convince leaders that their mindset should change, I show them a picture of my daughter. Why? Well, if you have a look around the offices of leaders, there are always family pictures on the desks. But if you look around most companies, there are often large TV-screens showing the company's share price and stock exchange rates, real time. Employees are able to follow the rates going up and down, illustrating the economic drive of the organisation in daily business life. So, then I wonder: would we come to the same decisions if these TV-screens would show pictures of our children instead of share prices all day? I don't think we would. Because looking at a photograph of your child when making a decision, forces you to ask yourself: Is this a long-term decision? Is this decision good for our children and generations to come? For example, if you are starting a project where you will use resources that will eventually run out, you'll need to think of a way to reproduce those resources and be sustainable. So they will be there for our children to use as well. Therefore, we should define a different concept for 'being profitable' as a company. A concept which not only contains financial values, but also social and environmental values. But even then, the problem is that the corporate world doesn't see itself as part of society. That perception needs to change first."

Mindset

"As part of this society, companies are responsible for the community being healthy, happy and sustainable and therefore we have an active role in composing this agenda, because an unhealthy society eventually leads to unhappy people and therefore unhappy businesses. In a way, business life is comparable to family life. If one person in the family is unhappy, this has an impact on the entire family. As a parent you can never be happier than the unhappiness of your child.

That's impossible, you carry the sorrow with you. But on a macro level, we seem unable to see it this way."

One of the roles of a leader is to inspire employees to be more responsible and to think of ways to really integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the DNA of the company, into the heart and minds of all employees. Because social responsibility is not just reserved for the top level of large companies, it's the management's responsibility to motivate employees to create social responsible programs. Tex Gunning has experience with this and gives a few living examples.

“Besides CNN Heroes, I see individuals in the Netherlands do things with great meaning. For example, a colleague of mine organises a 10 mile run called ‘Dam tot Damloop’ for Dance4life (an initiative that raises money voluntarily and unites young people to push back the spread of HIV/AIDS). I believe she raises 25.000 euros for this fund, an amazing job. Another example is a lady here at AkzoNobel who organises community service in Amsterdam; she encourages half our company to help with the painting of Community Centres. We also have a young woman working here that saves up all the money she earns, to build a school in Africa. So I see individuals from all levels of society setting up these kinds of initiatives, driven by a certain passion or experience, all wanting to contribute to a sustainable society. We don't always have to think big. People who think they are going to change the world are dreamers. But committing yourself to initiatives such as Dance4life, building a school or initiating a healthier food&life programme in a company are all great examples of social responsibility. Real examples that all contribute to a better world and companies should actively support such initiatives.”

Good leadership

“The most important thing I discovered in working life is: Great leaders are first and foremost great human beings. Every decision a leader takes should be in the interest of the organisation, the environment in which it operates and the people he or she leads. All over the world, I have asked people to describe their ideal company and everyone answers the same: every person wants to work in an organisation where they can grow, be meaningful, make mistakes and learn from them along the way. In short, a long list of human needs and qualities.

All these needs uncover an important role for the company's leader: he has a serving role, the responsibility to ensure these people are happy in their job. So, a good leader is someone who has the will to be there for his people and help them grow. Consequently, motivated people perform better, so opportunistically this is the best way to lead a business because it will lead to better results.”

It's all about the people

“At AkzoNobel we've developed a few beliefs that we try to embed in our culture. The most important one is: you cannot grow businesses; you can only grow people that grow businesses. It's all about the people. A company is a collection of those people and when you recognise that as a leader, you realise it's your responsibility to help your people grow, socially, intellectually and ethically. This will lead to better teamwork, better solutions, more sales and more profits.”

Accomplishing a cultural change is a huge process and often people want to integrate corporate social responsibility in their company, but don't know where to begin. Realising it's a long-term process, is only the beginning. Perseverance is the key to success.

“In order to facilitate our future leaders and help them integrate this belief in their daily work, AkzoNobel has a programme called Ignite the Spirit. So far, 18.000 employees all across the world have followed this programme. It consists of intensive coaching and leadership journeys. Every year each team goes on such a journey. In the morning we work, in the afternoon we walk around a local community or site (for example, a part of Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the famous pilgrimage walking route to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain) and in the evening we reflect on our day and think about what we've learned from this foreign culture and how we can integrate this new wisdom in our working life.”

The power of learning from other cultures

Indulging in another culture can be a very inspiring way to discover new visions and new ways to approach work issues. Tex Gunning believes it's a healthy thing for every leader to step out of his or her comfort zone occasionally and travel to another country, just to be inspired by another culture.

“Years ago I was travelling through India for Unilever and during that trip, whilst visiting a group of women from the Brahma Kumaris (an Indian religious movement), it hit me. The Brahma Kumaris are a community of 700.000 people working all over the world, teaching others about their beliefs. Everyone works voluntarily. That's when I realized: you need to define your company in such a way that people want to work there because it's meaningful to them. That insight led to redefining our business. For example, Unilever was selling soap. In India every year 500.000 children under the age of five die due to lack of hygiene.

At Unilever, we can save lives if we manage to teach these children about hygiene, clean water and washing their hands with soap. This means that Unilever is not in the soap business, but in the business of saving people's lives. And being in the business of saving lives, gives the work of your employees extra meaning. An organisation that has a real mission, a social mission, gets a totally different motivation from its workers. The same way, when I started to work at AkzoNobel, we also redefined the company's work. People use paint to add colour to their house and their surroundings, basically to add colour to their life. So, we don't just sell paint, we sell products that colour people's lives.

So, every leader should make an effort to explore other cultures. Just block specific moments for personal reflection and personal growth in your agenda. We can only grow as far and as fast as we grow our people. And our people can only grow as far and as fast as we grow ourselves as leaders. Leadership is not a position; it's a responsibility to the people who work for you. That's why leaders need to invest in themselves, not in competencies or specific skills but in themselves as a person, by reading, travelling, being in contact with other people and looking at role models. Not one role model, because no one is perfect, but learn different things from different people."

The importance of the arts

"During my career, I learned most from Floris Maljers, former CEO at Unilever and a very smart and disciplined man. I was his assistant for two years. He's the one that told me to stop reading business books and start reading Tolstoj instead. He said I could learn much more from literature than from non-fiction business books such as the stories of Jack Welch. So, I started reading a lot of Tolstoj, very impressive stories. At a certain point I also wanted to experience a more spiritual journey, so I read *The road less travelled*, written by M. Scott Peck, a marvellous story about personal growth and love and also shows that life is difficult. From the same author, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* is another story I learned a lot from. Life is difficult and leadership is also difficult. Working life is tough, because we work with people.

Every aspect of humanity happens in a company and as a leader, you need to handle all these situations. Leaders need a certain spirit: positive energy, humanity, resistance to stress and difficult circumstances, but the most important skill is to persevere. And you can do that by becoming a 'missionary', someone who really believes in his belief and follows his ultimate mission. Only then it's easier to keep your head up and persist during setbacks."

Bucket list

“During the past few weeks, I’ve been thinking about making a bucket list. But I don’t have such a list yet. It does make me think though; whom do I want to speak to before life ends? Do I have any loose ends? Or someone I want to reconcile with? I’m not sure yet. I’d like to have more time to read. For example *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Bradley, a thick book a friend recommended, apparently an amazing story. But about the bucket list, I’m a satisfied person, a happy person. I have a nice life; it wasn’t an easy life at times, but a happy life.”

Estafette

Camunico likes to share and spread insights. About breaking cultural boundaries and being inspired by all kinds of leaders, cultures and the arts. In every conversation part of this series, we present a quote from the last person we interviewed and ask the person we’re talking to now to reflect on that quote. We call it Camunico’s *estafette*. In our previous talk, Dominique Moïsi (a French political scientist and writer) said:

“For the younger generation, Europe has become a place to be and not a place to do.”

What is Tex’s view on this point? “I think we underestimate the beauty of Europe. I lived in Asia for 15 years and also travelled through America, but Europe is a step ahead when it comes to social development. I think we don’t realise how rich Europe is socially and culturally. We should make the younger generation aware of the great history we have here and what an incredible platform Europe is to create a culture that can be set as an example for other cultures. I live in Amsterdam now and when I look around I see so many beautiful places here, for example *Het Concertgebouw* and several museums. But also other European cities are so close by, from here you can drive to Paris or jump on a plane to Barcelona or Rome and visit the Sistine Chapel or stroll along the Seine. Europe is one big place full of amazing history, just around the corner. All this history is deeply anchored in our culture and we should look at it more positively and use the historical wisdom to restore the feeling of coexistence. This generation should realise that we can only live in coexistence with each other. Again, just like in a family, we need to overcome our differences and take in that we can only live together.”

Mr Gunning was talking to Carlijn Vis and

Catherine van Nierop of Camunico

