

A company based on love

BY MARCEL VAN MARREWIJK



Ilja Heitlager

Ilja Heitlager, information officer at the Amsterdam based IT company Schuberg Philis, delivered the second keynote speech on Thursday.

He sketched a situation which was common in the IT industry: 'Without realizing it, we created silos and hierarchy, frustrating the resource chains, inadvertently alienating our experts from our customers. Our people are very skilled and focused, but they were lost.' At Schuberg Philis, they found out that in times of crisis, for instance when a machine broke down, multidisciplinary teams were created, with experts in the front, solving the problems. 'That brought back the energy.'

The IT-customers demand 100% uptime, but eventually machines break down. By bringing expert teams in front of the customer while making them fully responsible for the entire system - not only of a particular machine - employees can show their mastery, their expertise, their craftsmanship. 'Our people are not 'running an IT machine', they are 'running a bank'. If the machine breaks down, people can't draw money, and they know it.'

Instead of focusing on what went wrong, professionals focus on the personal relationships with customers, discussing next steps. Ilja: 'The conversations changed: If people are responsible for the system, and something happens, they don't talk about the past ('what happened', 'what went wrong', 'why did it break down?') or about blaming others. Instead, they talk about the future and about themselves ('how do we solve it', 'how can we get the bank up and running?').'

Another thing that happened is that people built more personal relationships. Ilja: 'We found phone numbers of our engineers scribbled on whiteboards in our customer's offices. They know who to call, instead of just having to rely on an anonymous 0800 number.' At Schuberg Philis this approach became known as 'the cupfighting mentality'. It resulted in a customer recommendation of 100%, obviously out performing their market competitors.

Three years ago, they learned about Appreciative Inquiry, but did not have the guts to apply it in their business. The first annual gathering was a celebration due to a major commercial success; the second event did not bring the inspiration that was expected. The feeling grew: What's next? Leverage was also building up on the content side. At Schu-

berg Philis Appreciative Inquiry was used to work with methods, such as Goldratt's Theory of Constraint (TOC), always focusing on the weakest link within the whole system. It did not feel right anymore. It drains energy. 'We would like to know our strengths? What makes people get up in the morning? What do they bring to work?'

At the beginning, the three owners went to visit David Cooperrider in New York to prepare a three-day AI summit. They invited 200 people, employees, but also clients, family and friends. We started discussing what would we like to keep despite our desire to change? And what kind of culture do we need in order to support a major contribution to society? Indeed, as we spend more time working than with our loved ones, we make our professional lives more meaningful.


'That summit ended with 16 projects. But that is not the most important achievement. The main thing is that it gave all of us 170 people present the same energy and the same level of affection for each other, our work and our environment, making the connection stronger than before. We now go about our business and take decisions with our kids in mind. Will it support their future? That is what fuels our company right now, making work more meaningful and bringing our company to the next level.'

From 'cupfighting' to beyond 'cupfighting' implies a shift from inspiration to sharing, ultimately creating a company founded on affection and love.

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Also based on a blog posted by Saskia Tjepkema 
Video presentation Ilja Heitlager 