

Podcast #97 - Rebel leader with a heart

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regenerative work environment, emotional intelligence, servant leadership, low turnover, safe environment, positive feedback, long-term vision, humility, listening skills, innovative ideas, team engagement, recruitment challenges, managerial balance, Japanese culture, positive motivation

SPEAKERS

Murielle Machiels, Jean-Charles Dumont



Murielle Machiels 00:00

Hello, Jean-Charles, nice to see you.



Jean-Charles Dumont 00:03

Hello, Murielle. How are you nice to see you again?



Murielle Machiels 00:06

Yeah, great. So could you tell a little bit who you are?



Jean-Charles Dumont 00:10

Yes, of course. So I'm Jean-Charles Dumont. I am a Belgian of 36 years old and the father of a young girl of three years old now, and I am the plant manager of Fineo, which is a company making vacuum glazing for the bigger company, AGC,




Murielle Machiels 00:31

Great, great. And we met during a workshop that I was giving for the high potential people in your company, and you are one among them. And I really liked your story of what you managed to build in a plant, because I have the feeling that what you managed to build in that plant is really a regenerative work environment. So could you tell us a little bit more why you wanted to build an environment that is different from what people used to do and especially are doing already in other plants within your company.

 Jean-Charles Dumont 01:12

Sure, this has been a wonderful journey for me. Historically, I used to work in different companies, and six years ago in 2018, I joined AGC with the purpose of building this new plant. So we started from scratch. We actually started with zero, and I was the first person hired for the project itself. And so that was a biggest advantage for me to print my vision of how I imagined that people should be managed, and how we could implement such an environment where people would feel happy. And this comes from my past, where I used to work in Canada for three years, and when I was younger, I always thought that working was serious, and eventually I had a fantastic mentor over there who was like the funnest man I ever known, and he was the director, but he actually showed that having fun was also possible, making things going and moving forward. And I decided to say, Okay, now I'm going to try to apply that in my own team and with my own people, and try to grow a business with this. And we started in 2019 we were five, two engineers and three blue colors, and we are now six years later, with 70 people, about 11 white colors and about 60 plus blue colors. And one thing that I am very proud of is that out of the blue colors I only have in six years, three people who actually left the company on their own. Wow. So in six years that is, that is, for me, a massive achievement. And one thing that is quite weird, but it's quite unique. And to show maybe that what, what is impressive to me was that at the beginning, for the the couple of first years, the blue colors decided collectively to put money in a pot and to offer me a Christmas present. And I have never heard in the past or in my life, met someone who can say, I'm a plant manager, and I received a gift for Christmas from my people who actually put their own money on it. And I think that shows that eventually, yeah, something was going in the right direction for that, because I was offering probably an environment where they were listened to, where they could express themselves, even though at some point we had disagreement, even though we had to move in certain direction, because it was very difficult at the beginning, their success was not there. It's a launch of a startup. So you have always counter backs, and you need to adapt. But they could feel that they were involved in that, and they could feel that they were listened and they were actively participating in some decision, not in all, of course, and for sure, it was probably easier when we were in a smaller group than what we are now, because now it needs to cascade several layers of commands. Should I say it like that? And so for sure, my direct team is very clear on that, but they need to learn, because the process of me learning all these tools or all these behaviors to make people understanding and listen to and this is not naturally implemented in everybody's mind, especially when we think of work. Work is generally a word associated with birth. And stuff like that. So I try to make it a funny word, or at least a pleasant word to say. Yeah, I'm very happy to be here, and when I'm listening to my team today, yes, they are enjoying it, and they're now very keen to adopt certain behaviors that were not natural to them, and what

 Murielle Machiels 05:23

are those behaviors that are not natural to them, because you work in an environment with a lot of engineers, a lot of technical people, so a lot of rational people and smart people. So what are the behaviors that were not natural to them, that they had to learn

 Jean-Charles Dumont 05:43

Emotions. Basically, that is the one thing that is entirely different, and I have made a safe environment for people that they can express their emotions. Like if they are pissed off, they

environment for people that they can express their emotions, like if they are pissed off, they can be pissed off. That's alright. You can be as long as you don't go over a certain barrier of disrespect, you are absolutely right to shout. You are there is no problem. I I don't mind and and I will be. I'm not going to say protective, but I'm going to say it's okay to be like that. And then, even though you are not happy, you have the right to express it, which is in probably another environment would be disregarded. To say that is not acceptable. You cannot shout, or you cannot express the fact that you are against a certain idea or against a certain behavior, and then the listening is also one thing that is very different. I have teach, and I pushed my team every single day say, yeah, go there and listen to the guys. Do not make assumptions before, because that's a very classical way of engineers to do is that they are smart people generally, so they have plenty of creativity in their head. And they are probably saying, Yeah, I have already the idea before going on the ground. And I said, No, okay, you, you might have the idea, but I think it's Simon Sinek who wrote this book, saying leaders eats last or and it was coming actually, from Nelson Mandela, if I remember correctly, that he was saying that his father was always the last to speak and and that's what I'm trying to teach them to say. First listen to them. I do not assume that it's their mistake. Assume that you have a responsibility, or assume there is no one's responsibility involved. And then when you get all that and you have to listen to their emotions and to the facts, what they think of what they feel or what they saw, because one thing is that very quickly they switch to interpretation mode, and that is where things are. I'm like, Oh, stop. We need to go back. This is what happened you what you are stating now is how you interpret what things you have done. But this is not the truth. And this is the type of thing where, I mean, it's difficult to be as precise as and factual, for example. But yeah, that is the type of thing that we have put in place in here.



Murielle Machiels 08:12

You say, managing emotions, so learning to accept emotions in the workplace, to realize that they're there. Then you talk about listening and then noticing that you might be part of the problem. Yeah, so it's, it's a systems thinking, and what I heard, as well, was not learning to manage your mindset or your interpretations, really your thoughts and not interpret. So these are things that they have to learn so that the people are being listened to and involved.



Jean-Charles Dumont 08:55

Yeah, I believe very much in the fact that leaders are at the service of the execution level. And when you are in such a position, you need, one characteristic that you need is humility to say, Okay, I will help you, because at the end of the day, these are the blue colors who are making the plants running. It's not the engineers in the office. It's not the machine, it's like the real blue colors who are making it running. And so our goal as a management team is to help them to be in the safest, first and foremost, safest environment, so they all go home with all their members and all their health and safety situation, but after that to be the most efficient. And as I always say to the team, we only see them and we only see the machine. Eight hours a day, they are seeing the machine, 24 hours, 24/7 meaning they have more knowledge. On what is happening then, you know, but sometimes they do not be able to make the concept as you are trained to make concept as engineers or managers or whatever, and your goal is to bring this down and to make it in a pedagogical way or in a more comprehensive way for them, so they can be more efficient and more fruitful in their job on the shop floor. And yeah, that is what we are aiming for, in many cases, for that. So



Murielle Machiels 10:34

what you describe a little bit is also what we call servant leadership, so the leader is also at the service of its people, their people, and respects their people and really sees them almost as equals, or at least they can contribute as much as the leader can contribute, which moves away, and especially in the industry sector, from the leader that gives instructions and the blue collars who has to follow instructions?



Jean-Charles Dumont 11:08

Yeah, there will, I cannot believe, but that's a personal belief. I don't think there will be 100% decision that will be made on the shop floor, because some concepts will never be there and that will require some engineering or some management, or whatever. Sorry, some experience. But experience can come from various area. And in this case, we built a plant with people which were not coming from the glass industry. We had wood workers, we had clock people, we had bakers. And those guys have no idea what the glass is, but sometimes they are bringing ideas out of the blue and coming from total different area, where engineers who were with the experience of glass might have said, yeah, that doesn't work. And eventually, because we are not all from this, we are able to keep our mind open and say, Oh, actually, this could be applied by a small modification or whatever. And this goes in this way, and everybody's happy, because the person who's on the job will say, Yeah, my job is better now, and my idea is being received and from a management point of view, you would say, yeah, he's more efficient than I have better numbers, so everybody's happy with that,



Murielle Machiels 12:28

yeah, and what you're describing has also been researched, and the researchers found that teams where you have experts and non experts coming from a whole different area. When you have a safe environment and that these non experts come with new ideas, you get way more innovative ideas than when you have a team with only experts, or a team with experts and non experts. But that isn't safe enough for the non experts to express themselves, because they're afraid of appearing stupid in front of the experts, and so they don't say anything, and you don't get the innovation. So, yeah, great. And so yeah, what would you say that it makes a difference. So you say people are happy, so almost nobody left. But you also have a low absenteeism, as I understood it. Oh



Jean-Charles Dumont 13:27

yeah, we are in the numbers of like 4 , 5% today we're probably the average of the Belgian population is around 7 8 9, so, so we are below. The dream would be at zero, but I doubt that if somebody has achieved that, I'm really willing to meet him, because I would be in love with that person to find a way of doing that, because you always have, like, few people, and everybody can get sick as well. I mean, not everybody can. I mean, it's virtually impossible to have zero, but we are low, and that is yeah first from the framework that we have for sure, and if I have to take one example of showing that people are probably happy that we have organized a dinner for our Saint Nicolas party, because synthe class is actually the the Saint of

the glass manufacturers. And I believe there were about 80% of the people who were present to that, and in the same time they were another part of the the site, and there were only five or 6% of people who were there, and you could feel the difference of atmosphere. And there were some variation between the spirits in that and people are coming to us. They are they are willing to enter the offices, and they do. Not see much the hierarchical position they know, okay, I'm the director, and so they know not come to my office every single day to ask for a pack of cigarettes or whatever. I don't know but, but for sure, if there is a problem, they are absolutely not afraid of coming up in the chain of command to say, Yes, something is going wrong. We need to have an open discussion. And even though we have unions, and it's always a powerful situation in the glasses, in in the industry, but we are capable of discussing directly with our people and the unions so so sometimes I I've heard like in the past, I was in the siderurgy and I was in the foundry industry, you almost had no discussion with the people. You had everything to go through the union. And for me, that was like, That doesn't work. And in the reverse in Canada, you had no unions, and you only had the people to talk to, but having both of them here makes it more efficient, because you have the information straight from the ground, but you also have a few stakeholders with whom you can actually move the decision forward. So even though you have access to information, you don't need to collect and go to everybody and ask, blah, blah, you have a few person that are the stakeholders or the representative and that are efficient in this way. But it's also that they, the people, do not feel that they need to go straight to the union. They can still come straight to you or the management team and say, Yeah, this is wrong and we need to take action. You don't have the bureaucratic or the super heavy way of doing it, as we did in the foundry world.



Murielle Machiels 16:50

Yeah. And did you have some challenges hiring or having new managers entering the plant? Because for many of them, it's changing who they are as leaders at the level of being Did you have some challenges there, and how did you tackle that?



Jean-Charles Dumont 17:10

Yeah, so in in terms of management team, yes, I have had some challenges to keep the balance between being a leader, and sometimes, when you are a leader, you need to make decision, and so you need some confidence to position yourself and to make decision. And then sometimes it is, it's require a certain assertiveness. And in the same times, because it's an environment where I'm focusing on the people, you don't want to be too assertive, uh, otherwise you will be. You will become somehow aggressive.



Murielle Machiels 17:43

Directive,



Jean-Charles Dumont 17:44

directive,



Murielle Machiels 17:45

micromanager, yeah,



Jean-Charles Dumont 17:47

absolutely. And that is why I take a very long time in the recruitment process. I don't care if we have a little bit of overload of if something are going wrong for a certain time when I need to hire a manager because I want to go for the right person, and I use few criterias, but for sure, one is a feeling of humility of the person. If I have someone with an massive ego, he's going straight to the door because he's not going to be able to lower himself and to be able to go to the shop floor with the guys and have a small talk that is required, and then some sense of human behavior understanding that is



Murielle Machiels 18:35

emotional intelligence.



Jean-Charles Dumont 18:36

Yeah, emotional intelligence. That's the best word, actually, but it is less easy to catch in few interviews and when they are coming. I also evaluate some personality behavior. I've worked a lot with the insights model, and I have tried to get a very balanced team. So we have red people, we have yellow people and but we also have green people who are taking care of us, and some blue ones who are digging in the numbers for us. And so this is imbalance according to their position as well. For sure, the production manager, I tend to have someone who has been quite active and so a little bit more on the extrovert line to get to the shop floor, because you need someone who's going to be a man leader, not only manager, from a position and and, yeah, this is a challenge in the fact that you need to accept that it takes time, and the fact that you will have to slow down your process And to be sure that okay, even though you are under pressure because some work is not done because you're lacking of manpower to make it, it is better. I believe, and I strongly believe in that, that you better get someone good, even though it takes some more time, because on the long run, you. This will make a big difference.



Murielle Machiels 20:01

Yeah. So in fact, you apply one of the principles I love, which is you slow down to accelerate absolutely won't be able to compromise there, which is a mistake many leaders make. And I think we have to go fast. We have an issue, and then they make mistakes, and they get in this operational flow and having more problems. Yeah,



Jean-Charles Dumont 20:29

yeah, you're right. I absolutely agree on that. The fact is, most of the time, and it's probably due to our world, we tend to have a vision on a short term basis, saying, next month, next

week, I need to achieve this results and blah blah blah and blah blah blah. I have tried, and I have been luxury enough to join a company which has a Japanese culture, and Japanese have this great vision of a very long term. They do not see tomorrow. They see like 10 years from now or even further. And in this sense, they have been very gentle to agree that I am doing some stuff. And obviously at the beginning, our financial numbers were not super great, but I have strong belief that in the next future, our financial numbers will outpass the rest of the company, because we have created this environment. And when you have, as I said before, when you have such a low turnover experience, will stay in and you don't have to teach again to the people, because that's the trick. Yeah, maybe you hire someone very quickly, and then you discover that nine months later, it's actually not the right person for the fit. You have spent nine months of teaching, coaching, preparing this person, and you have to lay them off because it's not a fit in your company. And then you have to restart again, and for a couple of months, you will be with the overload of that work not done, whereas if you had wait maybe three months over before, yeah, after six months, you have a right person, and then you get the feeling that, okay, for the next year, it's going to be the same person again, and you gain that



Murielle Machiels 22:09

Yeah. So it's also about having a long term vision. Yes, on top of of course, the the short term is still necessary, but the long term as well, of



Jean-Charles Dumont 22:21

course. I mean, there is no business that runs only with the vision and except that they are the numbers in the reds and they're just saying that we are happy and making a fancy party whatever. Yeah, you always have, like, the constraints of a business. We are running business. We're not running a fair or Christmas party. But yes, I believe the long term vision still outpass The short term one, and that is one thing in our world which is less and less common even, and the biggest example for me. But it's not that, but it's a political vision globally. When we have the situation of climate, climate and everything today, we tend to see the four or five years of mandate that they get. They don't see the 30 years challenge of what the planet Earth is requiring, yeah, but that's another topic for another day.



Murielle Machiels 23:15

Yeah. And did you face challenges also with your bosses implementing this new way of working, or were they supportive? Or do they let you do what you want to do?



Jean-Charles Dumont 23:30

It has been a two two coin, because I have had two different bosses during the time. One was very comprehensive and actually shared the vision that I had, and I actually even helped him at some point, or we discussed together from the leadership. So so my colleagues and the upper team actually tried, and we tried together to implement a better way of working together. Unfortunately, is is not there anymore. And so yeah, there are a few challenges when you

change people which have an older mindset, should I say, or a more an historically traditional, top down vision, that for sure, is a little bit more different. It's not always the same, and then you need time to explain it. But in the same time, the one who are joining later are seeing the results to it. They know they they have the numbers, because eventually the numbers will speaks for you. Because when we started in 2019 we were a drama, and today we are not a drama anymore. We are on the way of being one of the nice success story of AGC. And it's not always straightforward that they will say, Okay, this is the environment you create that created that. But in the same time, if I am explaining it, if I am explaining and sharing the. Experience and showing you see all this is also possible because we have kept the people in because we have the people who are feeling safe, they can express and then as a team, we have been stronger than the sum of our individuals. And I am not the only one. And you can see that even when I'm on vacation or when I was in the parent leaving, things were running well, because people were sufficiently autonomous and in their way. For sure, I still have a role to play. And a colleague of mine used to say that I am the oil in the gear. So they are, these are all the gears, and I'm the oil. So so for sure, you don't need oil every day. If you have oil a little bit, then it can run. But if you never put oil, then sometimes it's going to shear or whatever. And when I'm sharing that with the bosses, they they obviously saw the results. And if we are now going to move to an expansion of the line, means that we are definitely in the right direction. And some people who were within AGC and in a different part of the company and join actually my team, are now very, very happy. They say, yeah, the environment that we are here is like different for sure. It's like a small paradise inside AGC, or small ways. This is a different way of working, but it, yeah, it makes a success story, so I will not change it for the world.



Murielle Machiels 26:30

Yeah, congratulations for that. So thank you. It's nice to hear because yeah, sometimes people say, yeah, it's possible, maybe with employees, but with blue colors, you they are not capable of take, of making decisions or being autonomous. But they are, of course, if you create that safe environment and you build things step by step, you have the trust so great. Do you also have figures on engagement, or



Jean-Charles Dumont 27:03

are you mean, like motivation, engagement of the people? Yes, no, we don't have that as a level of the plant. We have like that in the AGC level, but there is no vision planned by a plant. So no, sorry, I don't have that to share.



Murielle Machiels 27:21

Okay, so thank you very much, Jean Charles, for the great work you're doing. It seems that you managed to create this regenerative environment where then it becomes easier to recruit people, to retain people, to be flexible, to handle all the challenges together, and people are motivated to come and work, and they don't get home really depleted, like we are depleting our our planet. A lot of companies are unconsciously, and not, not really with intention, but unconsciously depleting people, and it seems that you have created that regenerative environment where people find it nice to stay there and to work there.

 J

Jean-Charles Dumont 28:12

I'm trying. It's a never ending story, but yes, I'm trying. And you will not ever 100% of people, you will always have, like, reactive people, of course, but globally, I think yes. And from the guys who have been giving feedback to me so far, yeah, they, they are, they are very grateful for that. And and when someone is grateful, they actually also give you the best of themselves exactly, if I can finish on that is that for me, most of the people, especially when we are speaking of blue collars, most of the environment, are working on the fear so when the manager or the boss is there, I will behave properly, but one is gone than during The rest of the 10 hours that he's not there, I can do whatever I want. He's not going to see it. Yeah, whereas when we switch that to say I want to work for this guy, I want to to achieve because he's like, he's a fair person, or he's inspiring, or whatever, then the the people will actually have the same behavior all day long, and you don't need to be there at night, because you know that they're going to behave the same way, and you know that they are going to act with the same intensity and the same intention that it be 3am in the morning or it's going to be 2pm in the afternoon. Yeah. And for me, that has been one of the key that I try to keep to say I want them to work because they want it, not because they are fearing of what is going to happen if they do not do it. Yeah,



Murielle Machiels 29:49

and if they receive positive feedback, and especially feedback about who they are, there also research shows that what. It's best is when you tell people, oh, you're really great at that. I'm proud of you. You're doing such a great job, then people want to live up to that story, yeah. And when you say to people, who are? You suck. You made a mistake. What happened here? Well, then they think, okay, whatever I do, I suck? So they're less likely to try. That's also what research shows really Yeah, giving positive feedback on the identity level and believing in people really helps people to become even better and want to become wanting to become better at what they do, yeah, to live up to their reputation. Yeah, exactly, exactly, indeed. So thank you.

 J

Jean-Charles Dumont 30:46

Thank you, Murielle, for inviting me on that. That was a real pleasure.



Murielle Machiels 30:50

Yeah, I will put your name on LinkedIn. So if somebody wants to connect with you, they can find you on LinkedIn.

 J

Jean-Charles Dumont 30:57

I'll be very happy with that. Thank you. Thank you, bye, bye, bye.