

Cooperative skills indispensable for the company of the future

Author: Kuijpers

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Jelle Reinders and Pim van der Putten had a conversation with Aukje Kuypers (CEO at Kuijpers). Jelle and Pim (both graduated in Building Physics and Services (BPS) work at Kuijpers and served as active members of Mollier.

Jelle: "The first time I came into contact with Kuijpers was at the strategy meeting in Zeist in 2012. As students, we were involved as the moderator and facilitator at one of the sessions aiming to arrive at a strategic plan for 2013-2018. Kuijpers is launching a new strategy project for the forthcoming five-year period. Are you planning to involve Mollier/BPS students again?"

Aukje: "As an organisation, we were very enthusiastic with this working method. Do you think it contributes added value?"

Jelle: "Yes, definitely!" Aukje: "Then it would seem logical to work with students this time round as well. We may want to involve younger students or even kids. One thing is certain: a different dynamic emerges and that's precisely what we are after in a process like this."

Aukje: "Do you think it's interesting for students to be involved in a different way? To be brought on board at an earlier stage of the process?"

Jelle: "I expect students would enjoy that, as it would create a kind of student counsel. They could provide direction, help to set the pace and, of course, develop ideas and have a glimpse of the company and their people."

Aukje: "It's fantastic that you got to know Kuijpers as students and that we're now sitting together around this table! You're in a perfect position to assess how we've done. We've expressed our ambition to create zero-energy, healthy installations only."

Pim: "Do you have insight in the share of zero-energy installations created so far?"



Figure 1. From left to right; Jelle Reinders, Aukje Kuypers, Pim van der Putten

Aukje: "We've arrived at roughly 50%. I'm satisfied: dialogue surrounding sustainability with our customers kicked off properly in 2013. There are examples of zero-energy and gas-free buildings (JADS Den Bosch and Fries Museum in Leeuwarden). This often leads to two proposals: in addition to a solution for the regular request (if this isn't energy-efficient), we propose a green alternative acting on our own initiative. Nowadays, all new buildings have to be highly energy-efficient; the green option comes into its own within the context of renovating existing buildings. Certainly at the outset, many customers were not yet ready to take huge strides in the sustainability arena."

Jelle: "How did it feel for you as Managing Director, being keenly aware of that dot on the horizon, when customers in the early days chose for the cheaper instead of the more sustainable solution?"

Aukje: "I'm positive about the steps we have taken so far; our people are communicating in a fitting manner with our customers and business relations. You can't expect customers to elevate sustainability to the top of their list

of priorities overnight. By genuinely listening to one another – and having patience – you see customers become more open to such ideas – in part driven by the Netherlands' ambition and the associated measures and legislation. We increasingly hear: 'Actually, the advice we got a few years ago was exactly what we needed. If only I'd invested then. I have to do double the work now.' Customers also increasingly understand that the spirit of the times has changed. Yesterday's idealism has become today's realism."

Pim: In my opinion, there are a number of areas in which Kuijpers could improve. Take R&D, data analysis and information management for example. I'm working at the Tenders, Design and Calculation department at the moment and I can't help noticing that we have loads of information at our disposal that could potentially be of use company-wide. We have yet to come up with an effective way of sharing it. I see a lot of potential in setting up an R&D centre or department. However, I only see a limited number of graduates from universities of technology (TU/e) at Kuijpers. This presents a great opportunity!

Aukje: I see the potential as well. We could most certainly get more out of this. There are plenty of designs related to the information management theme for us to create graduation assignments for a range of disciplines. Would you be willing to supervise such a traineeship?

Pim and Jelle: Yes, of course!

Aukje: "What is important in a job, if you're recently graduated?"

Pim: "When studying, you're often preoccupied with new developments and addressing a huge variety of issues. What's more, you practically always work in teams. Students nowadays identify with dynamic, complex issues. I deliberately opted for a position within tender management. This means I'm always confronted with different viewpoints and continually changing team compositions."

Jelle: "It's important having opportunities and having a good working environment. I'm with engineering now, which initially involved less teamwork. But as I'm awarded more responsibility, I automatically have to cooperate more. You're tossed in the deep end and immediately want to come up with multidisciplinary solutions."

Naturally, you need to consult your colleagues and other companies. I like to work like this, but it's not everyone's cup of tea. Although I do think this is more ingrained in our generation. The approach at colleges and universities usually hinges on working in multidisciplinary teams. What appeals to me about Kuijpers, is that there are so many opportunities. However, you have to take the initiative and make something of these opportunities for yourself. That's fair enough, and it tallies with the initial briefings on recruitment."

Aukje: "That's nice to hear. We invest a lot of time and attention to this. In some cases, people aren't (entirely) comfortable in a certain position."

If you talk about it, you can do something about it together. But if you don't, you run the risk of losing someone. Not only is that a pity for Kuijpers, it's unfortunate for the colleague in question as well."

Pim: "The fact that Kuijpers is a family business and that these values are firmly embedded in its corporate culture, were determining factors for us choosing for Kuijpers. How do you maintain your corporate culture, despite the company's enormous growth?"

Aukje: "First, I have a question in return. In your opinion, what are the specific values and characteristics of a family business?"

Pim: "Open, accessible, human and independent top the list of values I expect and these must be directly evident and confirmed during the application process. People that are cut from the same wood work here: open and friendly." **Aukje:** "Previously, social cohesion existed as the bottom line. This applies to groups of around 100 people. Fuelled by the company's growth, there is now a need to organise gatherings, because we are literally removed from one another in increasing numbers. Figuratively, we try to keep the gap as small as possible."

At a glance, it's all about small details: doors not being shut, no walls or only low barriers. This impacts your brain – be it conscious or not. The glass table we are sitting at didn't fall from the sky. It represents transparency. There are no hidden agendas and nothing is swept under the table. We aim to connect people – not only at individual sites or subsidiaries, but throughout the company. We sometimes do this specifically surrounding a theme or specific functions / knowledge. Sometimes, it's purely about meeting.

What's more, it's important to establish a link between stories about the past and today's reality. Just imagine, we've worked with some of our customers for close to 90 years."

Aukje: "How do you think we could involve the younger generation more intensively and effectively in the company?"

Jelle: "There's already plenty of room for initiative. Traditionally, you're supervised by your manager who's been around for longer. I think you can learn a lot from someone who is closer to your own perception of the world. I'd be happy supervising trainees, for example."

Pim & Jelle: "What advice would you give to today's students?"

Aukje: "It would have to be to 'do what you enjoy doing most'. That's what I learned in my formative years. There was absolutely no pressure to join the family business. If I look at the future, I'd say the most important thing is to know who you are and what you stand for. Cooperative skills are extremely important in the circular world we are aiming to evolve into. I even dare to say that what people call 'soft skills' should be called 'hard skills' and vice versa. Because your personality is what it is – you can always pick up skills and knowledge."

Aukje: "And what advice would you give to Kuijpers?"

Jelle and Pim: "Hang onto the people's vitality and continue to place people centre stage, lead the way in terms of new technologies and high-reaching ambitions, and keep the friendly atmosphere and open family corporate culture intact." ■

Kuijpers is a professional engineering service provider with a workforce of more than 1,200 employees, generating a turnover of €230 million (2018). We design, construct, maintain and operate engineering solutions in buildings and industries. Offering this comprehensive service package, we contribute towards a healthy working and living environment. Our ambition is to create zero-energy, healthy installations only.

Thanks to our integral approach, country-wide reach and broad range of in-house specialisations, we're capable of providing our customers with optimal service – from the beginning of the process until its conclusion. And, in many cases, well beyond. Real people working on real solutions: the wishes and resources of our customers form the starting premise. Kuijpers is a family business, operational since 1921. Our presence throughout the country facilitates country-wide and local involvement. Our commitment also extends to our customers and workforce. By knowing one another, we can work well together and get the best out of one another. This is how commitment gets results.

