

Setting up a future-proof organisation

How can a raw, tough port contribute to answering sustainability issues? In this interview, Linda van Waveren talks about how Port of Amsterdam's sustainability programme ultimately also led to a change from within by deploying employees more sustainably.

The importance of sustainability

Linda: 'Port of Amsterdam is the director of the Amsterdam port. With some 370 FTEs, we handle shipping traffic, the establishment of industrial companies in the port, and the management of the area on a daily basis. When you think of a port, you don't immediately think of sustainability. Yet this has become an increasingly important issue in recent years. The whole energy transition, the shift to a circular economy, the increasing focus on the environment, the quality of life and how we treat our planet are high on the agenda nationwide. Clean shipping is obviously also a focal point for us. That is why I started developing and implementing a sustainability programme as a sustainability programme manager seven years ago.'

Different decision-making processes

Port of Amsterdam has a culture characterised by a lot of pragmatism and entrepreneurship: 'The people who work with us are driven, they love the port. At the same time, the challenges heading our way are becoming ever bigger. This calls for different decision-making processes. Addressing bottlenecks ad hoc is no longer always effective. We increasingly came to the point where we asked ourselves, "Is this a future-proof decision?" And linked to that, "How do we actually define our success?" We are less interested in tonnes of transshipment and turnover and more in adding broad value for the city of Amsterdam, the region, and the Netherlands. We are now focusing much more on becoming future-proof, and that includes a systemic change.'

Another course, then. But how do you go about this? Linda: 'About two years ago, we partnered with NieuwBestuur. This is a knowledge platform for future-proof governance and new leadership. Together with them, we rolled out the Future Proof Governance programme to revamp the way decisions are made in our company. The great thing is that, as sustainability programme manager, I had the opportunity to guide this development together with HR colleagues. Thus, the programme works both ways: we work on the sustainability of our services, but also on new leadership and organisational culture.'

Young board

One component of the programme is the installation of a Young Board. 'Our current management team includes experienced professionals who are seasoned in their profession and often also within our organisation. We benefit enormously from their knowledge and expertise, but at the same time we see that the downside of this is that it sometimes creates blind spots. Other, new perspectives focused on long-term decision-making were needed. We organise this with the Young Board. On this board, five young people within the organisation - the youngest is currently 23 - strike a new note. The Young Board and the Board of Directors meet every month. They talk to each other about current issues through a predetermined agenda, but in addition, the Young Board can also bring signals from within the organisation up for discussion. The Young Board brings out the unsaid. That sometimes causes friction, but that is exactly what we want. After all, there is no polish without friction.'

No coal in 2030

The fact that short-term and long-term decision-making often conflict with each other is illustrated by, among other things, the explosive increase in the volume of coal transhipped at the port to meet Germany's energy need that is the result of the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine. At the same time, Port of Amsterdam has committed to its vision to stop trading coal at the Amsterdam port by 2030, thus creating space for renewable energy sources.

'The crux lies in the period up to 2030; do you take all you can get in the next eight years and stick to the '2030' rule? Or do you use the perspective of 'the intention', namely to leave as little damage as possible for generations to come? In this case, the Young Board brought the latter perspective to the attention of the Board of Directors. This led to the rejection of an application for a temporary contract extension for a coal terminal.'

In full development

Just hiring a Young Board won't get you where you want to be. 'No, this is just part of the organisational development process we are in the middle of. The young colleagues who take a seat on the Young Board receive intensive training and guidance during this process. It is important that they feel the safety and confidence in themselves to speak out knowing that it may go against a decision taken earlier. At the same time, the management team is also being trained and coached. They learn to be open to other perspectives and approach new thoughts and ideas with curiosity. We are working to create an equal role for both parties, without the Young Board losing its autonomy and freedom.'

The Young Board has now been active for 10 months, and we are in full development. For example, we are now in the process of defining their role and embedding it in the organisation. In this way, this turns into a tool that not only has a permanent place in our decision-making processes, but from an HR perspective is also a wonderful way to offer development perspectives to young people within our organisation and connect the organisation at different layers.'