

# **PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION**

The English translation of *The Last Manager* which was first published in Dutch in 2010, comes with mixed emotions. On the one hand there is the reassurance that the book has withstood the test of time. Moreover: since then, some of the organizations in the book have grown considerably and proved more successful than I had predicted. This holds especially true for the home care services company “Buurtzorg” in the Netherlands. Since the publication of the Dutch edition, it has grown from a thousand employees in 2010 to more than ten thousand in 2017. Moreover, the concept has received international recognition and been replicated in other countries. But also other examples of different organizations have been successful, and there are plenty of new concepts of management models in the making.

And yet, it's ambiguous. In the Western world, the traditional, top-down structure and layers of managers that tell professionals how to do their job still prevails. The anticipated collapse of the oversized, unwieldy management structure, which I predicted in 2010, has (yet) to take place. Sure, there are signs of decay. There are more signs of a lack of confidence from employees and customers, sometimes even failure in employee and consumer confidence; there are signs of moral decline, as in the Libor affair, or in the case of Wells Fargo Bank. You can ask

yourself: have we not learned anything from the banking crisis? Apparently not enough. Maybe it has to get worse before it can become better.

Granted, many companies have started changing their internal structure. They have downsized their management, have introduced self-managed teams, and they try to reinvent themselves. They are genuinely looking for their mission or 'purpose'. But most of the time that still happens top-down, by a management that knows something has to change. They want to revitalize their lifeless, cumbersome, over-sized management structures, but they use the same old instruments that they always used. It is as if they treat someone having a heart attack with a blood-letting, and not treating the cause.

When I wrote this book, I would have hoped that six years later the world would have evolved. I had hoped that the management concepts and achievements of Buurtzorg, Semco, and W. L. Gore would have inspired CEO's to totally revamp the management structure of their companies. And that if anyone at a party still would say they had a manager that others would empathically console them. Unfortunately that hasn't happened. Not yet anyway.

But it's not too late. As already stated, many businesses are still searching for their purpose and how they can reach their full potential. They can find inspiration and examples in what other businesses and management teams are doing. Also, there is more literature about alternative ways of organizing work, and by this, the alternative becomes less alternative and more as a viable solution to the problems of our times.

That's one of the reasons for this English edition. The search for an alternative business without managers, which was first inspired by Buurtzorg, has become more relevant than ever before. At the time, Buurtzorg was a small, unknown Dutch company that first had to prove itself. Nowadays, Buurtzorg has grown into an internationally known poster child for an alternative management model. That means that in the world of management, the search for a different business structure is more relevant than ever before, not only in the Netherlands but throughout the world.

I hope this book will contribute and give professionals the chance to do what they do best, practicing their profession, doing their job. Because that's what it's all about. Contrary to what the title might suggest, this book is not *against* managers. It's *for* creating businesses where professionals can do their job well, and the work they love. Whether it's in the field of education, health care, police, or business, we will all profit. Children get better education, the elderly and sick receive better care, society is safer, and as a consumer we get better products and services.

# INTRODUCTION

*“In the late industrial period, companies were organized in large, pyramid-like structures that were no longer manageable. They were governed by fear, oppression, and unrealistic job targets. Large armies of officers, called managers, were hired to ensure that the workers, euphemistically called “employees”, carried out their work, which was thought up by the executive board. Eventually they lost control of their businesses which went into a tailspin after a series of crises during the twenty-first century, and ultimately perished. “*

In a hundred years, will they write that about us? Who knows. In any case, our descendants will ponder about our economic, moral and environmental crisis with astonishment and incomprehension. They will probably regard this period as a waning era. The last days of the industrial age with its factories, managers, and mindless employees. For them, it will be inconceivable that the system has sustained for so long!

The signs of decay are blatant. Not only the perverse bonus system and personal gain at the top, but also a lack of innovative capacity and employee interest in their work indicate that the system is sick. Firstly, I will sum up the seven symptoms of this disease that are each fatal in their own right. The scientific management model, which was thought up more than a hundred years ago by Frederick Taylor and successfully executed in the Ford factory and the Bethlehem Steel Company, has now played

out. Now to motivate highly skilled, confident, and intelligent employees we need something else besides a manager who, with a stopwatch in his hand, tells them in detail what they need do. It's not their fault that employees are not content with their work. Today, the most managers I know, work very hard and do their utmost best to help their employees and the businesses they work for. Moreover, they are not the ones that earn big bucks and profit from huge bonuses and severance packages we hear about in the media. No, they are the group that are only one layer above the people they manage and only earn a little bit more.

Despite the fact that they do their best, they too are no longer able to achieve as much as they used to in the past. They sadly see their best employees quit and start for themselves while the dead-weight ones remain behind and resist any kind of change. What's the manager doing wrong? Not much, I guess. But he's in an awkward position. It seems the moment a manager is hired whose main task is to manage a group of intelligent people, the employees magically turn into a docile flock of sheep that await instructions. That's not the fault of the manager, and it's not the fault of the employees. It's the consequence of how we organize businesses and organizations. And also, the fact that a manager was hired in the first place.

But what's the alternative? And is there really an alternative? As long as this form of management is still the most successful formula that we know and continues to produce the most profit, you'd have to be crazy to try something else. Don't change a winning team! But even the best teams lose some-

time. When you always win, players get cocky and lazy. The other teams compete smarter and faster. And then the magic formula doesn't work any more. The coach (read: the manager) gets the blame and is fired. But this line of action rarely leads to the desired effect. The root of the cause lies much deeper and requires more drastic measures, like coming up with an entirely new game plan.

The million-dollar question is: What's next? How do you manage skilled and intelligent employees? Or do you have to give them their space and freedom, and hope that creativity will flourish and brilliance will emerge?

I sought out businesses and organizations that have taken drastic measures. They really allow their skilled employees the freedom to do their work as they see fit. I searched for businesses that were structured completely different, without hierarchies of managers and big offices. I was on a quest to find organizations that inspired their employees to give the best of themselves. Not for their own ego or for their boss' bonus, but because it is their job. And because it makes a difference and helps other people - whether they are customers, patients, or citizens.

I discovered that in the industrialized West there are almost no businesses or organizations that are not interested in doing things differently. Sometimes it is called "the new way of work", "social innovation" or "workplace improvement". But almost always the intention is to provide the professionals with more leeway in their job and to allow them to do the work the way they see fit. Another important insight was that this idea

was not that revolutionary. Already in the mid-nineteenth century the Prussian army had figured it out. However, because the Germans lost the Second World War, their organizational and management model was disregarded. Since then, the American system of *command and control* has dominated.

I visited businesses and organizations in a wide variety of sectors. I wasn't necessarily interested in the success stories that everybody heard, but I wanted to know the brass tacks of how it worked. For example, I visited the world-renown Semco company in Brazil, famous for its radical form of industrial democracy and corporate re-engineering. But I also investigated how a district police station in Amsterdam operated. I checked out the Dutch army, but also examined an ultramodern office of Microsoft. I interviewed medical specialists in hospitals, but also one of the brightest minds of the high-tech company TenCate. I also talked to district nurses of Buurtzorg in Amsterdam. You will find numerous experiences from these businesses and organizations in this book.

The latter mentioned organization, Buurtzorg, is probably the most extensive and best example of a new management structure that I have encountered, and therefore the first chapter will address this organization. For a sneak preview, Buurtzorg is a Dutch home care organization that in the last ten years has grown to more than ten thousand employees who work in independent teams of ten to twelve nurses. The nurses manage everything from schedules and office space, to finding new clients and bookkeeping. There are no managers in the whole organization, and is operated by a staff of only fifty people that

work out a small office in Almelo. This model, which makes Buurtzorg thirty percent cheaper than similar organizations, has been replicated by many other countries including Sweden, Japan, China, and the USA.

Is this the direction organizations are headed? Is the new management model going to be named after Jos de Blok, the founder of Buurtzorg? Who knows? In the coming years Buurtzorg will have to continue to prove itself. There is always a risk that the organizations that copy the Buurtzorg model do this only partially, and reject it in the end 'because it doesn't work'. But although it may not work in every situation, the organizational model inspires others, and offers an alternative, an alternative that has been confirmed by other organizations that I investigated. Employees are given more autonomy and freedom in their work. That is a point of no return. And as a result from that, there are fewer or no managers required. We will cordially thank managers for their work. Now they need to go find a real job. Hopefully they've learned a real profession, otherwise they're up shit creek.

My journey for the new business organizational model took me from the small town of Almelo, the Netherlands to the salt mines of Wieliczka in Poland and to the tropical gardens of São Paulo in Brazil. What I found is not good news for the manager, who is likely to become an endangered species. It might be extreme to notify the International Union for Conservation of Nature and have the manager listed like the Bald Eagle. The good news is that the extinction of the manager will allow a new species to flourish, namely the self-managing employee.



His natural habitat, the new organization is not an easy one to create. You're not there with high ideals and the notion that employees should be given as much freedom as possible. If the right structures are not in place, the organization risks the danger to revert back to old habits, especially when the economy struggles or employees get too much freedom. That happened at the end of the Internet hype, when companies experimented with new forms of management. In the last chapter I will sketch some of the elements of the new organizational model, not meant to copy blindly but rather to have an idea and allow the reader to get started to build a new organization of his own.

I hope this book inspires you to create your own new organization. This will certainly not be easy, but it is definitely worth the effort. Just to get an idea of how successful this management model is: Buurtzorg receives more than a hundred applications a month. Usually by word of mouth, they've heard how nice it is to work there. The clients of Buurtzorg gave it a score 8.7 for care services. Moreover, the cost of home care is considerably less. The accountancy firm Ernst & Young reported that if the Buurtzorg system was implemented throughout the Netherlands, the Dutch government would save approximately 2 billion euros annually in federal contributions to the health care sector.

Now, then everyone profits.

I wonder how they'll look back on that in a hundred years ...

## 1 | MR. JANSEN

Mr. Jansen is a senior citizen of Amsterdam. He still lives at home in a ground floor apartment on one of those pictureque canals of the Dutch capital. However, he is getting old, and required home care services for the elderly. Caregivers are sent to his house to help him bath, dress, cook meals, and sometimes administer medical treatments, if needed.

You might say, good for him. But Mr. Jansen got a bit anxious with so many different people coming to his house. There was one person to help him shower and get dressed, another one for medical treatment, and then someone else to make his lunch. They were all very nice and kind, but they were always in a hurry, and rushed off after they were finished. They never seemed to have time for a chat or a cup of coffee. Sometimes Mr. Jansen waited for them to come, sitting in his pajamas on his chair by the window. Sometimes, he waited all day.

Nowadays, there is usually only one nurse. She does everything from helping him take a shower and getting dressed to giving him medical treatment and even washing his dishes. The lady takes her time, drinks a cup of coffee with him, and asks how he is doing. He likes it much better, and has calmed him down. Mr. Jansen is doing much better now.

Mr. Jansen receives elderly care from the Buurtzorg team, which is located in the center of Amsterdam.

“He is prospering,” reports one of the nurses named Niesje

Snijder. “He can remain living at home and for people like him that is very important.” That’s why Niesje Snijder does this work. To help people like Mr. Jansen remain in the comfort of their own home as long as possible. That’s the reason she chose the nursing profession. But in the last few years, she worked lesser with people like Mr Jansen. More and more, she found herself sitting at the computer, filling out applications for indications, or doing increasingly more administrative work. And if she visited a client at home, she was only allowed to do what was stipulated in her task description. For example, if she was at a client’s home and the caregiver who was supposed to dress the client in the morning never showed up, she was required to contact the agency and have another caregiver sent over. She was not allowed to help her client herself. That was not her job. “But that’s not the reason why I became a nurse”, she argues with dismay, sitting in a chair in a small converted office in the center of Amsterdam. “I wanted to help people, not fill out forms or be a machine that asks people to roll up their sleeves and only give injections”.

Her colleagues Claudia Sol and Monique van Dijk both nod in agreement. They also have plenty of examples of how personnel in the elderly home care are plagued with poor management, heavy workloads, uninspiring and monotonous work, and limited access to nursing care in the area. When the senior home-care company she worked for announced new layoffs again, she had it with them. She contacted Jos de Blok of Buurtzorg and asked if there was a job for her and three of her colleagues. And yes there was. “That’s how we started. With the four of us sitting around someone’s kitchen table”.

“Similar to Snijder, currently there are about a hundred nurses per month that apply for a job at Buurtzorg,” says Jos de Blok in his office in Almelo, located about a hundred kilometers east of Amsterdam. “It’s all very spontaneous, we don’t have to recruit anybody. They’ve heard about us and think “that’s what I want too”. When there is a couple of them, I usually go over and explain how it works. Usually in the living room of a nurse, who gathered a couple of nursing friends. In the past I also worked as a nurse, so I just tell them what I think from what I have experienced in home caregiving. I explain what is wrong with home care these days and how we can improve it in the Netherlands. I tell them that we are not just a new home care company, but that we work differently. We want to help people, not delegate tasks. They usually like that and get enthusiastic. Then I say, “Think about it carefully. Ultimately the clients have to be better off, not me or Buurtzorg.”

According to De Blok, that is exactly one of the main problems with the current home care services, namely that the interests of the company prevail over those of the nurses or clients. De Blok knows what he is talking about. He used to be a manager at Carint, a homecare company. “The problem with health care services is that we started to talk about tasks and procedures. We’ve divided everything up into different tasks, like bathing, dressing, medical treatment. For each task, a different nurse is coming over to the home of the client. Each task has to be cost efficient. You’ve got to imagine how stressful and impersonal that is for a client! The people who receive home care are vulnerable. All of a sudden, they’re taking their clothes off in front of a

perfect stranger who is supposed to help them shower. Every-time there's another person. On top of that, there is also the coordinating and extra layer of management that is required to coordinate all of these tasks."

At Buurtzorg the nurses do everything themselves. There is no manager or planning personnel. From bathing patients and dressing them to providing medical care and inserting a morphine pump. That means that a client only has to deal with one nurse, or, at the most, only a few nurses when the clients requires full-time care. That makes the client feel more at ease and also saves the nurses in traveling time and the company coordination costs. At the Buurtzorg's main office in Almelo there are only fifty people besides Jos de Blok who manage the company, which now has grown to more than ten thousand employees. Thanks to an ingenious IT system, nurses can manage their own admin hours, do their own scheduling, and keep track of other things that are work-related. Snijder smiles, "It's that simple...even I can do it." Through self-management and no "dysfunctional hierarchy" as De Blok calls it, Buurtzorg's overhead is only a third of a normal home care company's: ten percent instead of the usual twenty-five to thirty percent. This is one of the reasons why Buurtzorg can hire highly-trained and thus more expensive nurses, which can only be expensed at a reduced rate for caregiving.

"When you take into account that caregiving should namely be about helping people get back on their feet as soon as possible, with the support of family or neighbors, you're often dealing with complex situations. There are usually many factors involved. You have to take under consideration how your client is coping with

# The Last Manager

A PLEA FOR FREEDOM, EQUALITY,  
AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Imagine a world without managers. A world where you can do your work the way you think best, without having to account for everything.

*"The eight thousand nurses at Buurtzorg, a Dutch home care services company, work in teams and manage everything themselves like planning and renting office space. The clients are very satisfied and the company is thirty percent cheaper."*

Science fiction? No, everywhere in the world, managers are being laid off. If the trend continues, in ten years the manager will be added to the list of endangered species. Will it be an ecological disaster? No, because he will leave a team of well-trained and motivated employees behind who are capable of managing their work for themselves.

Managers are a dying breed. Read this inspiring book on how more companies and organizations are relying on their entrepreneurial, autonomous professionals.

**Ben Kuiken** is a Dutch author and philosopher. He is the author of six business books and is considered to be one of the most influential business thinkers in the Netherlands.

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