Podcast
Creating a level playing field for collaboration
Tonnie van der Zouwen

# #16 Lieteke van Vucht Tijssen: Courageous executives – realising a cultural turnaround in a collaborative manner

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## Keywords

sociology, education, co-creation, quality culture, Large Scale Interventions, organisational change, higher education, teacher engagement, collaborative environment, resistance to change

## Summary

What is the role of executive leaders in a collaborative change process? In this inspiring episode, we sit down with sociologist and former university executive, **Lieteke van Vucht Tijssen.** She takes us back to a pivotal moment in her career: stepping in as interim board member at a Dutch University of Applied Sciences in crisis. With financial instability and declining educational quality, Lieteke faced the challenge of turning things around, without resorting to yet another costly reorganisation. Instead, she championed a bold cultural shift: moving from a rigid, top-down management style to a participatory, quality-driven educational ethos. She takes us behind the scenes of a pivotal moment—the 2010 “Craftsmanship and Mastery” conference, where 300 staff, students, and leaders came together for a one-day large-scale intervention. Through carefully designed dialogue, clear frameworks, and inclusive participation, the university community began to reimagine itself—not as a “bachelor production machine,” but as a true house of education. Through her story, we explore the power of intrinsic motivation, professional responsibility, and the role of co-creation in building sustainable change. She also shares practical lessons on executive leadership, student engagement, and sustaining change through follow-up actions.

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## Transcript

[*Italic words are spoken by Tonnie van der Zouwen*]

## Introduction to Lieteke and the executive perspective

***In this episode, we welcome Lieteke van Vucht Tijssen. Lieteke, welcome.*** Thank you.
***Can you please introduce yourself?***
I am of the background sociology and that's for me not only a profession but something that is deeply connected with myself and my work and I'm not a scientist anymore but a practitioner of sociology and in particular sociology of culture. I'm pensioned already for quite a time, but I'm still active. And I'm very flattered that you invited me to tell something about my involvement with co-creation, with World Cafe, with large scale interventions, because that's one, that are my favourite ways of leading change and bringing people together in organisations that are that large, that you never meet everyone in the organisation in the ordinary ongoing activities of the organisation.

I started my career as a teacher and later on as an associate professor of a rather big general university in the Netherlands. And I became member of the executive board of the same university. I had portfolios of finance and of human resource management and later on of quality education. And after a number of years, I left that university and started a career as interim governor or director of various universities.

I would like to tell you more about the role of the originator in the preparation of a co-creation event like Large Scale Interventions. And I like to do so very much. And

therewith I will focus on an assignment for which I contracted you and a colleague of both of us to design a large-scale intervention for the university I worked for at that time. And therefore we go back in history some 15 years, which is quite a lot of time, but this kind of interventions and the problems and the successes are really timeless. So that's not a problem.

## A university in crisis: Challenges for the interim board

At that time I was an interim member of the Board of Governors of a rather big University of Applied Sciences, which had run into trouble financially, as well as with respect to the quality of the education. The Board of the Governors and most of the supervisory board had already resigned. And together with two colleagues, I was nominated by the Dutch government as an interim member of the temporary board of governors who had to solve this crisis. The crisis I just mentioned was twofold. It was financially and it was educational. And my portfolio was education. And of course, I started talking to people inside and outside the university and reading reports in order to find out what the problem was and what should be done. And one thing became clear to me that is that this university had been governed by means of a very hierarchical and quantitative planning and control cycle. And that this was an important source of the problem. All the more because they had combined it with a carrot and stick way of steering. And that had blocked a lot of communication from the top to the bottom. And what was worse from the bottom to the top. In fact, the bottom was protecting itself from the communication from the top because they were afraid to be punished if they did not well enough. Well, and another closely related problem had to do with the lack of active participation as a consequence of the teachers in designing the educational program.

So there was no dialogue, there were no vertical relations upwards, only downwards, and there was no horizontal collaboration between the teachers. It would have fitted in the logic of this hierarchical way of steering the organization to eliminate the two domains which were at the evidence of all the trouble by means of a reorganisation. But this was out of the question. It would be very costly, and it would not have solved the quality problems on the educational level, far from that. More recently there had already been a reorganisation and nobody was in the mood for another one.

So I, as responsible person for the improvement of the education, I had to find another way out. And my first concern was to look at the educational standards we had to meet in order to obtain the great sufficient or more for the quality of education, because that was the particular crisis, the lack of quality of the education. My second was how to change the organization and this way of teaching in such a way that we would be able to reach those goals in a sustainable way. This kind of turnaround is quite easily made superficially and that means that it will last for the time necessary until the second control and then afterwards it will go down again. My ambition was to change

it in such a way that it would continue as an improvement afterwards much more time. A consequence of a top-down planning and control-driven quantitative way of steering is that the management process becomes the primary process and that every attention and every effort to improve that goes into the management process and that's on the detriment of the education.

## Turnaround to a quality culture in education, engaging the whole system

Well, the main objective of a university still is and was clearly to offer good educational programs and diplomas to students with impact. And as a matter of fact, our University of Applied Sciences was not the only one into trouble. Elsewhere in the sector, quality was also going down. And the Dutch government, therefore, had decided that the whole sector needed to develop another culture about education, not a managerial culture anymore, but a culture that they called a quality culture for education. And the basis for that would be a quality as a professional attitude of the teachers. And that was something new. That was easier said than done. But nevertheless, we were not in a position to hesitate very much, but we had because we had to improve the education rather fast. We took the challenge Now it sounds very simple and free-spirited to take quality as an attitude as a starting point and as an objective.

it is important to understand the far-reaching consequences of this kind of turning around. A top-down steering culture is mainly based on top-down decision-making in the confidence that everyone will do as decided by the top and that everyone will be praised and punished according to their achievements with respect to realizing the objectives formulated by the top. It also strongly leans on the so-called external motivation of its collaborators. And if you look at an educational quality culture based as quality as an attitude, it is clear that this is on the contrary primarily about the intrinsic motivation, professional values, standards, responsibilities, and behaviour of the employees. And it involves things such as a professional ethos in the teacher, an openness of teachers to criticism and intervision, education as a joint activity and team responsibility instead of being designed by staff and top down offered by the top of the organization. It also supposes a participatory and committed groups of students and so on.

So in order to change the university in an organization with such a quality culture, we had to turn the organization upside down. The primary bearers of the required quality culture would not be the managers and its staff, but the teachers. Teachers are in that culture the frontline soldiers. The change from the hierarchical management process, therefore first had to focus on the mental schemes and the practices of the teachers and at the same time on the active participation of students in their own education. And if we would succeed in realizing this, that would mean that we not only would improve the quality of the education, but that we also would earn back the autonomy of our university, which at that time was on close observation of the government. So

once decided that we would take a quality culture as an objective, how could we address each other as a board and the top management on this? And how could we involve the entire organization in this revolution? Preaching top down would be a very bad idea to create a change bottom up. And apart from that, we had to overcome some real blockades in the communication from various sides amongst each other. So we needed to find a way in which we could activate the whole community in order to do this turn together and focus therewith on the educational process and appeal to the inner drive of the teachers. And the inner drive of the teacher is mainly the passion for the profession, and the pride in their professionalism. And luckily, we discovered that although they were working in a top-down managerial-driven organisation, there was still such a passion and such a pride with the teachers. So by actively involving them in developing and monitoring the quality of education, we would create ownership.

## Applying the Large Scale Interventions approach for whole system change

As this development would have consequences for each and everyone in the organization, it had also to take place in the specific context thereof and in consultation with other stakeholders, such as students and representatives of the professional field and with the controlling organization. And this all had consequences for the change approach. With the help of my colleagues, I already tightly controlled the short term recovery process for the Red Card programs from the top down. But at the same time, I used this broadly spread to embed the legal quality standards throughout the institutions. And besides, I also had introduced quality reports on the educational programs next to the quantitative ones. And that were three months reports. So that was also quite a measure already.

In an earlier assignment, which had to do with culture in a very large international organization, I had worked together with a colleague consultant of the firm, and this colleague was an expert on Large Scale Interventions. And I had organized with her an event on a rather large scale, which had turned out very well. Therefore, I approached her again and asked her if she could design a similar process for me again. And she proposed me to choose a so-called large-scale intervention approach, which is a proven approach to initiating and supporting such a thorough turnaround process as I wanted to organize. And she suggested to involve you as another LSI expert, as partner in the implementation of the assignment. It is a participatory approach for organizational change and community building. And the term large-scale not only refers to involving the entire system of stakeholders where a large number of people can be worked with. But characteristic is that at one or more moments representatives of the whole system, the stakeholders, are working in the same space to form a joint picture of the situation and to take responsibility for a desired and feasible future. This approach is theoretically well founded, and research shows also that LSI is effective for questions

for which we need each other for success. And that is very important when you want to organize a change process in a government controlled university. You have to do that with a science based method in order to get the confidence that you're doing well. And it was also in the line with the open discussions that we stimulated throughout the organization and which we tried to set a good example ourselves.

## Establishing clear boundaries for the playing field for collaboration

An advantage was also that the change process itself would remain a management responsibility. Thus the management could continue to play an important role in the organization thereof. And that diminished a lot the resistance of the top-down used management. They could still focus on an important task, the development of a sustainable quality for the coming years. So paradoxically, with an LSI approach, the usual top-down culture and decision-making could moreover be combined with the input of a large group of lecturers, students and other stakeholders. And the process would set up a clear and strict management and decision-making lines from the executive board. So we would still steer on the one hand on the managerial level and at the same time also support the horizontal level in creating a quality and in particular teachers in creating that quality culture.

## Forming a stakeholder steering commission, including a governor

The first thing I did was something I brought from my experience from my first job at the university. I nominated a program commission composed of representatives of all the relevant internal stakeholders of the university. I had already some experience with creating educational programs with a variety of stakeholders at the university. And one of the tricks really is keep them represented in a program commission. And that provides you with ambassadors. They tell you which problems you are going to encounter, which bears are on the road that you can move away, eliminate already which other kinds of stumbling stones. And moreover, they also will come with their own objectives. And it is a very useful thing to have. And you have used similar commissions for a long time already. And somewhere in a recent article, written by you with a number of colleagues, amongst them myself. You spell out also a number of criteria for the composition of this kind of steering committees and the advantages you have when you do that kind of commissions. Well, this commission consisted of 15 people, and they formed together a cross-section of the system with lecturers, students, executive board, the various management layers.

That sounds quite easy, but we had to persuade nearly every level to provide for representatives in this commission. Most of the time because the teachers did not so much protest. They very much liked the idea that finally they were taken seriously, and they could tell what they had to offer. Students is always a kind of problem because they spend most of the time at studying and having a student life and you have to

persuade them also a bit more than the rest. The executive board was willing to participate. And that was very important, but it's also if you compare that with executive boards in other organizations, it's one of the rare birds which participated in this kind of process. Most of the executive boards try to keep a little bit away until they certainly know that it will be a success instead of participating in making it a success.

## Challenges at the top, fear of losing control

I got them on board because I could persuade them that in situation of urgency in which we were, that it was necessary to have them immediately on board in order to know what was going on in the university and how we could change problem of the executive board was in fact also a quite well known problem by now is that they were accustomed to that traditional planning and control cycle, and they had a number of objections. First simply because they couldn't imagine how a participatory way of steering would work. Their primary fear, and probably you remember that, was that they would lose control. And apart from that, they believed that such an LSI meeting probably would end in a total chaos without any acceptable result. And they couldn't afford that in view of the, well, the assignment of the government we had. And on top of that, they did not believe that all teachers and staff involved would be able to come up with worthwhile goals and valuable suggestions on how to reach them. So they saw only in a quite exaggerated way the risks and didn't have any feeling with the advantages. But still, because we convinced them with the program commission and with the help of you and the plan you were offering. I succeeded in reassuring them and convincing them that they had to be there and that when being there, they still could control. If they would think that it would turn into total chaos, that they could end the whole thing. So that was a... Yeah.

That was quite a job. As one of the reasons that it took quite some efforts before the planning committee agreed on the design for the process about what was the focus, how many meetings, what is a good invitation strategy should be invited and how. Ultimately, it was decided to hold one university-wide conference with a broad representation of teachers, managers, support staff, and also members of students. And this focus of the conference was on three subjects, equality culture, teacher in position, the educational vision, and student success for students.

## Courageous leadership to overcome fear and misunderstandings

Well, this stumbling stone was out of the way, but meanwhile some of the major other stumbling stones came from two dissident members of my program commission itself. What they did, they tried to stop the organisation of the event totally. And it looked as if they were rather successful because my colleagues wanted to stop the whole project all of a sudden. And even I had to come back from my holidays. I got a mail from my both colleagues saying that it was a pity, but that during my absence, they had a

discussion with some directors and on the base of that discussion they had decided to stop the whole event. So I had to return from my holiday earlier than I had foreseen. And I had to see that the whole project was continued because otherwise we would not arrive at the whole objective of the process, creating a quality culture. I could have been very angry with them and with my colleagues, but I think that's not a very good reaction in such kind of situation. So I decided, although I was very angry inside, let's say that, and very disappointed. But I decided to invite in particular the domain directors, most of the domain directors to talk about their objections and their motives, their sorrows, their fears and about mine. And then it proved that the university quite recently I mentioned in the beginning that the university already had underwent a process of reorganization. that in that process they had already held a strategic conference in the traditional style. And they were afraid that the results on which they already worked would be canceled. That was the one sorrow. The other one was that the positions of the people who were the directors of the domains were quite recently nominated as the directors in a process of renewing the management of the various domains. And their sorrow was in the name LSI. They did not understand large scale intervention as something that would be nice and that would be connecting people to each other and giving better information and so on and so on. They thought it would mean large knives and big cuts, throughout the whole organization, and that we would take them top down and that we would remove them from their post as directors. Well, we weren't, we didn't have that idea at all because our philosophy was that there was a lot of talent and we discovered it already in that university, and that we should use that talent and that motivation in order to really improve the education and to create that quality culture. So I could reassure them that that was out of the way. Both things were out of the way and that they would have a full contribution. But still the result was not that we could have more than one conference. In the end, the program commission decided that one conference would do and that we had started the turnaround and then afterward took it to implement it in the regular process of the university. I was quite happy that I reached that conclusion. And I think it was certainly not the best decision I have ever taken because I already had found a way in order to continue the process after the conference, but I will come back to that.

How did I experience this period? if I look back now, I think that I was rather courageous. But at the time, I didn't feel that way. I felt the necessity to save this university together with my colleagues and to turn it into an example of a university with a good quality culture. I think that is part of my inner motivation. I always have considered education as one of the most important things that you have yourself and that you can provide to other people. So for me it was an inner and outer motivation to do this assignment well. And I think that because of my sociological background, I could also overview what the implications of the LSI and the good consequences of such an LSI would be. And I had experienced it already in an international organization.

## A one-day large group conference to initiate the turnaround

I was quite confident that this would be a good move for that university. And you helped me be at that conference also because you arranged a very good conference which took place in the autumn of 2015 under the title Craftsmanship and Mastery. That lasted the whole day. There were about 300 people that participated. The planning commission had chosen a program with a tight time frame, well-prepared instructions and clear frameworks. Clear frameworks is to say what we will not talk about. And that was very important because in many of these kinds of interactive processes, all kinds of things come on the table. And if you brainstorm like that, it's very difficult to achieve well formulated conclusions and objectives. So it was well prepared instructions, clear framework and the participants would work in more than 30 table groups. And what you did very well also that sometimes you split it up groups. I remember that at one time you set the management directors together in order to invite them to talk together about their problems with the organisation and their problems with each other. And that turned out, instead of being only part of the other groups with the risk that they would be attacked by, for example, the teachers on their management strategies or by each other. And that that helped very much to, how do you say it, to keep the discussion friendly and calm and open and also the instructions that you should listen to each other, that every contribution counted, that everything should be noted on the large flip over sheets and so on, contributed very much to a very calm and fruitful discussion. There were four rounds and the rounds were quite generally formulated. The first was exploring the past, where do we come from, and that you did by a huge role of paper in which everyone could write their history and their role and things of that. And that was what the strong point of that is that if we put it at the entrance and the people came in and they started noting, they started looking at each other's notes, they started talking to each other. And they came in, not in groups of similar people. It's not so that first the teachers came and then the managers, but it all was mixed. And for the first time, I think probably in their lives, they talked informally with each other. And that already relaxed the atmosphere very much. And that happened more in the rest of the process.

Then exploring the present, where are we now, afforded the people to realize themselves what was going on. And then the next one was going exploring the future. And that was a very nice one also with people again talking to each other in all kinds of combinations. But at each table was invited to design an image of the future of the university. And to our great, well, amazement, what came out was that instead of a managed program filled in by the teachers. A house of bachelor production. A machine of bachelor production. That was in fact how they experienced their universities. They wanted a house of education. And that was, I think, the most important result that came out of this in the sense that it motivated people enormously in trying to make the turn around that was asked for them in order to create that quality culture.

## Clear frameworks for collaboration

But now I told how I have experienced it and what I have seen also on that day. But I was very curious also on the background of the issues, how you experienced that day. ***Maybe first in the planning committee or how you call it, the steering committee, I experienced how really valuable it is without measure to have someone from the board of directors in the planning team. Because when there are people who feel insecure and uncertain in the change approach, you were the only one to say, and I've heard you say it, okay, I've heard your concerns, but this is the way we're going to do it. And we did. And after the first conference, many other followed in the specific domains. I think there were maybe six or seven more large group meetings, but more specific for departments, so that's one thing. And another thing I remembered, you opened the conference, you were talking about in a huge event centre, without daylight, that was, you can't have everything. But you started with saying how important this day was for you and for the whole university, but also what was non-discussable. And that's very valuable too. What you call the clear framework. Okay, I can understand that you have negative feelings about the mergers we did of universities, of schools, but we are not going to split again. We are not going to change the name. So a clear framework of what's non-discussable and a clear playing field. So that's I really appreciated. So that's how I experienced it. And of course, it was quite a challenge to lead the day with 300 people. And of course, you never know what's going to happen, but you have to trust the process. And I think we did well, because it was well prepared with a large group, 15 people and we had a good participation. People were well invited, so that really worked. But it took a long preparing time.***

So, and maybe... I like very much the way in which you and Eva ran the day. You had a kind of collusion with the students, I thought. ***Yeah, maybe. Because I think they need extra attention all the time. And what I learned from that first conference later on, when we wanted a large representation of students, and like you said, they have other things to do. And teachers, they come in paid time. So we started to pay the students. It was one of my lessons. And they don't come only for the money. Because it also conveyed the message. We think it's important that you come.***

## Follow-up actions to sustain change and growth

Okay, the conference yielded interesting results in several areas. That was this broad niche for changing from bachelor into an education house. We had many building blocks put on the table. And one of the important things was that I had negotiated with the colleagues of the board and with the directors of the domains, that the only thing that we would change in the strategic plan that they had formulated before we were there was the educational part. So they had to come a new educational note. And one of the most important results of this one-day conference was that the educational note was produced very quickly after this conference by the various domains and very fast

adopted. And that I think was a very important point in turning around because they adopted also the conditions for realizing these educational notes.

And also talking about the students, and then you can see how important they are. This was also due to the students. They helped to break away from the old patterns. For example, during a discussion about improving the situation and improving education in one of the domains, the student said, yes, stop whining about how difficult it all was. We know that now, let's talk about what is possible. And that's also one of the important things, the sharing what people find regrettable, what they are proud of, their own contribution, and it makes the participants aware that it's not all misery, but there's also a lot to be proud of and that helps enormously because you can only make such a turn if the ones who have to make it have a certain confidence in themselves that they are able to do that. And that changed also their, the whole fear of the LSI.

And it was also a consciousness that the organisation is also a community, raising conscious, rising conscience that it's not only a machine, but you have to work together and that you have to lower the thresholds for contact. And the whole conference encouraged people to meet each other and to look for each other in the organisation. it's, well, I think that for one day it broke down the walls around all parts of the organization. But later on still some, most of the walls were more transparent and easier to find a way to go through them then instead of remaining in those silos of management that they had early on.

***And I remember that we even provided a training course for maybe 12 people of the university on working with this way of developing.***
I think this is a very important element. If you organize such an event and you involve that many people with this kind of objective, then you have to see to it that something is done with the result. And the whole consequence was after the future images, the last part was thinking of actions and measures that would help the university to achieve that house of education that they wanted to be. And if you don't take care of the follow-up as a board member, then you make a big mistake. That's why I think that board members have to be there at the beginning, have to see what is in there. That was also a positive result. They were delighted with the result, both of my colleagues. They appreciated very much and they were convinced that it was a very good strategy. they supported me much more afterwards than before. But you have, you have to see really that the organisation does something with the output and the outcome of the conference. So we have to organise that. And as we had no expertise in our organisation, in that organisation with respect to lead this kind of process and to organise them, I had to provide the organisation with that kind of expertise on the level because the domains who had promised to pick up the results and to implement them themselves in their part and produce that educational note and also carry it out in action. And the only thing they themselves could do was managing top-down. And

therefore I provided them. I asked to train a number of willing staff members to be able to also guide those kinds of and organize those kinds of events for their domains.

And I gave the choice to the domains to choose for themselves whether they want to improve the quality in a traditional way or they would make a turnaround. Most of them made the turnaround. And in the end, I was informed that all of them have made the turnaround some years ago already. What happened was in fact that there was a visit of the Quality Commission later on in April. And we passed the first, how do you say it? The first audit. And we got some more time, but at that time I had left the organisation already, but I following and there were a number of domains indeed made already at that time the turnaround.

But some years later, they appointed, and that proves already that they were as an organisation. In reality, it takes some three years three or four years before you can make this turn around with the whole organisation. The disadvantage of the Dutch audit and control system is that it wants it to be in one and a half year or two years, which is well, a very difficult task, so you have to focus on some core points. And that was done. And I think that after four years that my successors continued with this movement. And after some years, they appointed as the successor for the then governing member, they appointed a former chairperson of the Board of Governors of the Amsterdam Art University. Okay. And as art is something that is funded in the professional quality and in the intrinsic motivation of the artists and not so much on the outside control. She continued the whole process in an excellent way. after four or five years, visited again that university. They invited me to, and they were in the process of evaluation, And that looked already very well. Well, I was flattered that new chairperson who came from the arts faculty and she said to me that it was to a great extent again thanks to me so that it was a nice compliment. But the most interesting confirmation, I sent it to you I think, I found on LinkedIn. And that was an announcement of the same university. They were going to establish a new domain on PABO and that is the education of teachers and that they had involved the whole world in order to develop the plans with them. The students, the teachers, the support, the managers, the parents and at the moment it is a great success. ***And I've seen that they even have a centre of expertise in co-design and also co-designing programs. Yeah, beautiful.***

## As a governor, take daily sorrows and small results into account

***Looking back on our conversation, is there something you would like to share regarding creating a level playing field for collaboration?***
I think that what I'd like to share, which is one of the things that was already clear in this project, recently became again clear to me. And that is that it is very important to take into account the daily sorrows of people, but also the small results. And that is what you noted also in the whole process at that University of Applied Sciences, that if

you think that the things they come up with are simple, beware, is something behind it. And you have to enter the simple problem in order to be able to discuss the problems behind them.

***Okay, thank you. So that's a nice conclusion, I think, to end with. So thank you so much for your rich stories.*** Thank you, Tonnie, for inviting me to tell my experiences with creating a level playing field for everyone.

## More info

- Lieteke van Vucht Tijssen on LinkedIn
- Article 'Enhancing the Impact of Co-Creation Research: Large Scale Interventions With a Stakeholder Steering Committee for Whole System Engagement'
- Article **'**Kwaliteit als cultuur. Ruimte voor de innerlijke drive van HBO studenten**'** (Dutch)