

***“With agile I spent more time on direction & vision than ever”***



**-In depth interview with Noor Cloo,  
Commercial director  
Eneco/Oxxio/”WoonEnergie”, on Eneco’s  
agile transformation**

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When head-hunter Edward van der Born learned I was starting up this interview-series, he linked me to Noor Cloo. Thanks Edward! I interviewed Noor on November 28 at Eneco’s head offices in Rotterdam. Due to an accident in December I had to delay my writing for a few months. But I think the waiting was worth it ;). With Noor, I started off the interview with the same question as with Bouke:

***“Can you bring back what represents the start of this journey for you personally”?***

She explains, the starting point for her is a personal one since she works at Eneco approximately 1,5 year at the time of the interview. The change process itself we are looking into, had then already started. 100% linked to CEO Jeroen de Haas’ decision for Eneco to focus fully on sustainable energy, decentralization of energy production and community thinking. Coming from the believe consumers will transform into energy producers in and around their home.

This was the outside in trigger for Eneco’s internal transformation. It meant, the company had to transform from supplier of energy, via consumer services to partner of households. Changing the entire core business and business model of energy supply to consumers within now and 20 years. How this should be realised was not yet exactly known at the time. Over 2 year’s ago, Eneco reviewed it’s organization and way of working in order to fit the new vision. This was approximately half a year before Noor joined Eneco. When she did, the new organization was only a few months old. So she instantly became part of this new reality and change process, which had only just began.



**About this interview & series:**

This interview is the second of a series held by RibbonWood consultancy. We name the series:

***“Ambidexterity in practice: transforming working behaviours in fast technology & business model shifts-personal leadership pains & gains beyond “agile buzzwords”***

Organizational ambidexterity according to Wikipedia “refers to an organization’s ability to be efficient in its management of today’s business and also adaptable for coping with tomorrow’s changing demand. Just as being ambidextrous means being able to use both the left and right hand equally, organizational ambidexterity requires organizations to use both exploration and exploitation techniques to be successful”.

Kees Lindhout and me picked this theme since transforming via behavioural change is RibbonWood’s expertise. **How does this feel in practise during change and how do you cope?**

The interview with Bouke Hoving (EVP Networks & IT KPN) on KPN’s simplification & innovation programme is our first in the series. Noor Cloo is the second. The interviews with Eric Kuisch (CTO & Board member Vodafone Germany) on post merger integration Vodafone Germany-Kabel Deutschland) and Robert Otto (Board member Achmea) on concern simplification are already held and will be published next. New interviews are planned with amongst others Anneke Blok (CEO CITO) on evolution and digital transformation.

***“Why was an intervention on organization and way of working necessary to realise the new strategy”?***

More speed was needed in the execution of the new vision and strategy. With a shorter time to market and more customer oriented thinking and operating. Eneco was organised as a classical organization. It had many layers and a lot of top-down direction. Also operationally. The idea was to decentralize more ownership in order to facilitate and boost innovation in many areas at all levels. In commercial, products, processes and way of working. In an earlier stage, IT had already started to work more “agile”. Now the consumer perspective was also added involving commerce.

The vision of Eneco becoming a partner of households producing their own energy served as a burning platform for internal change.

***“Did your perspective on what needed to be done change after you joined?”***

“Yes, sure!” Noor immediately states. Eneco has this practical “roll up the sleeves and get things done” in their Rotterdam-DNA. Which is a valuable asset. It is action oriented, can do and makes things happen. In these first months with Eneco, also being the first half-year of the overall change process, the change was mainly about the agile methodology itself. Of organizing work and teams. And less on the “Why” and goal-achievement.

The first phase of change was mainly focussed on implementing the agile work method and less on actual goal achievement.

I (Femmeke) note heavy focus on methodology is quite common in the beginning of transformation programmes implying new way of working. And it is not necessarily a bad thing. Unless it becomes dogmatic. But attention is needed when critical questions on the goals, which should be achieved by these new methods, are not (enough) addressed. Especially since there is a strong focus in agile working on the priorities and workload (backlog) of the individual teams.

One of the biggest risks with agile working is over-focus on just your own team (“postzegel”).

***“Which methods and interventions did you use to manage the change process?”***

After the initial phase, an important first intervention was absorbing the consultancy work on the new agile way of working into the own organisation. This was done in order to develop and build internal competencies and knowledge instead of just become a copy of somebody else. And most importantly, to review and evaluate the progress of the original goals of the new direction. Requiring a helicopter-view.

When working agile, keeping the end in mind is very important to stay efficient.

As an outcome, the amount of customer assignments the teams were working on was decreased. Due to overlap in the scope of customer journeys worked on. The original set up required too much inter-team discussion and alignment. This led to the second intervention, decreasing the amount of teams organised around specific themes by 50%. Which meant working with 3 instead of 6 teams and thus a change in organisation structure. I asked Noor on her own personal role in all this. She explains she asked for an analysis of overall goal progression. But the decisions itself were the outcome of the collective evaluation process. And for a big part brought forward by the teams themselves. Initiated by the product owners of the original 6 teams.

***“Can you explain how you cope with diversity in way of working in Eneco? Agile versus non agile and different variations of agile?”***

The only way to cope is to place oneself in someone else’s shoes and start a conversation. The most important thing in agile working is to realise it is just a way of working and there is no one size fits all. An orientation in the other person’s or department’s needs will most of the time bring an appropriate solution to meet shared goals.

In coping with internal diversity in way of working, you have to be open to each other’s situation, characteristics and needs.

“Does this process follow a certain planning or is it more trial and error?” Noor explains this is more trial and error and develops situationally. Different departments have different characteristics and agile itself as a methodology also developed further in Eneco. Like was the case with scrum masters transferring into agile coaches moving away from just methodology and adding team coaching and development. But both are important depending on the situation. As was stated earlier in this interview, in every unit at the beginning of an agile transformation the focus is mainly on implementing the new way of working. In a later stage team development becomes more important as well.

**“What is your advice to other organizations embarking on alike change processes?”**

I ask Noor after her advice for other organisations who feel the need for agile way of working in order to execute their strategy: “Since agile can only help you to execute your strategy faster and/or better if, and only if, you can be extremely clear on what you expect and why. What if you can not provide this type of clarity?”

If you cannot be extremely clear on what you expect and why, don't start with an agile transformation.

Noor states agile working requires higher transparency and clarity levels of what you expect and why compared to more classically organisations. “If you cannot be extremely clear on what should be realised and why this is so important, don't start with this type of transformation.”

Get some sort of learning agility tooling for insights in competencies to be developed or recruited.

Allow yourself to do some sort of assessment on learning agility of your current workforce. This will get you insights in competencies and development potential. Also for managers and leaders. Even more so taking into account their responsibility for individual, team and leadership development. Learning agility can be developed, but not everyone likes continuous change & adaptation processes. This type of insights can, as a tool, help extra influx of agility as an outcome of your recruitment process. At Eneco, learning agility was used in practise to get an overview of potential product owners already employed in other roles. Later on, a high correlation was discovered of higher turnover rates with lower scores of staff on learning agility.

This being said, learning agility is a valuable asset for certain roles, like product owner, but you need a variety of skills and competencies in your organisation. Not just (learning) agility.

**Do agile teams develop faster?**

I ask Noor the same additional extra question as Bouke. I cannot ask it to all participants of the interview series. But it is relevant for the agile transformation at Eneco.

Relevant and quite well known theories on team development are “Lencioni” and “Tuckman”. Both theories are there already for decades. The [Tuckman](#) model for team development originated in 1965. [Lencioni's](#) 5 dysfunctions of a team is more recent and first published in 2002.

There were some early experiences with self-steering, but the agile Manifesto is only from 2001. **Over the past 15+ years, the scale and scope of agile way of working have increased substantially. Are the classic team development theories still relevant in the modern and changing workplace?**

Personally I find the proven track record of teams needing approximately 4 years to become high performing challenging. Especially when you realise what this actually means in practise. As the team composition has to stay quite stable in these 4 years as well.

I ask Noor to reflect on her own experience after 1,5-2 years: **could agile working shorten the learning curve of team development?**

Noor, like Bouke, believes teams go faster through the development stages in agile organisations. But why? Especially taken into account people in agile environments are part of different teams at the same time. Which could in fact make team development more difficult?

We discussed a very important factor, which could be responsible for speeding up team development in agile environments. And is also a big difference compared to more classic organisations. This is structural team coaching as a formal dedicated role. Whereas in more classic organisation structures, managers are integrally responsible for the strategy (execution), the finances AND the people.

Also, Eneco did not change all the units and departments in “one big bang approach”. It went with a unit-by-unit and function-by-function approach. Based on an assessment of need for change and expected results. Noor advises to start an agile transformation if there is a concrete need for change to realise your strategy. I (Femmeke) note this coincides with Bouke Hoving’s advice to plan situationally and “rather go narrow & deep” instead of general and shallow.

Only start an agile transformation if there is a concrete need for change to realise your strategy.

*“This means, different ways of working, agile and non agile and variations on agile exist within one and the same company. So quite ambidextrous. Shall we talk a little bit more about that?”*

### **“How would you describe your personal leadership style with respect to change?”**

*“You already mentioned “keeping the end in mind”. Can you elaborate a bit more also with respect to managing change and ambidextrous situations?”*. Noor explains for her focus on results is very important. Including the overall common goals, which go beyond those of the individual teams. It is an apparent paradox, but new agile ways of working actually require a very disciplined approach to progress of results in line with the overall direction. Only then, the teams can work as autonomous as possible on how to achieve the goals best. *“Could you say that in summary your leadership comes down to the trio of results, direction and autonomy?”*. Noor acknowledges and adds that these 3 aspects also need rebalancing from time to time as the change progresses.

In an agile transformation, leadership is all about direction, results and autonomy.

### **“What are your biggest leadership learnings?”**

As manager and/or leader it is a process in itself to adjust and discover your personal added value. “At least that is how it was for me” Noor mentions. “Like in the beginning my initial reaction was to keep myself at some distance since I did not want to intervene operationally. Taking into account the type of change, which needs autonomy, my own personal style and because I just joined. After a while, I discovered my own personal added value was actually to be close, not at distance, but focussed on driving vision and direction. “With agile I spent more time on direction & vision than ever before”.

I discovered I could not keep my distance but should focus on delivering vision and direction.

“My other learning is to be aware of regressions in my personal style and the entire organisation’s when results get under pressure. The immediate, sort of natural, reaction is to intervene with detailed instructions decreasing the level of autonomy. So in a way falling back into previously dominant behaviours. It’s contra-productive although it feels familiar and comfortable in practise.”

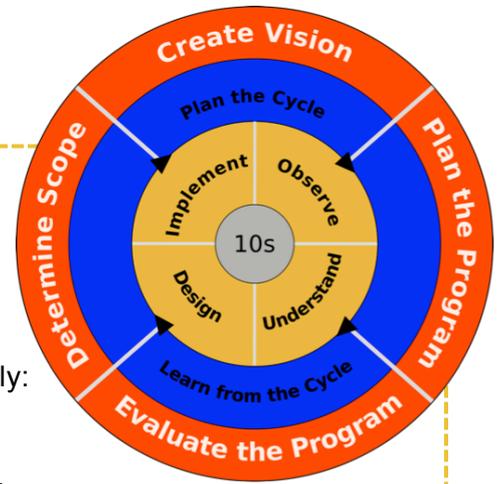
If results get under pressure, do not fall back into previously dominant behaviours like intervening with detailed instructions and decreasing autonomy.

### **“What matters most for the next phase of change?”**

*“1,5 years is significantly enough to do a retrospective and outlook for the next phase of change. Can you tell us about your focus areas for the coming period?”*. Noor states the current situation of an upcoming **change of ownership** of Eneco could be a determining external influence. There are different scenarios. (A) new shareholder(s) could intervene in the current strategy and the way it is executed. Whilst the agile transformation already changed the company, culture and workforce. With a significant portion of current staff deliberately choosing to work in the setting of the current external strategy and internal transformation. There could be a potential risk for retention of critical staff should such a situation and interventions occur. Surely Eneco has a role and responsibility to engage potential new shareholders in the strategy and execution. Apart from this external influence, the transformation is not yet finished and there is still enough improvement potential to work on going forward.

We appreciate your constructive inputs and reactions on this interview article. You can also e-mail us at [Noor.Cloo@eneco.com](mailto:Noor.Cloo@eneco.com) and [Femmeke.ruisch@ribbonwoodconsultancy.com](mailto:Femmeke.ruisch@ribbonwoodconsultancy.com). Let’s share and learn together!

## Appendix: Change management framework reflections:



The change management framework states 6 non-negotiable principles for successful change: **Compelling vision, 2. People involvement, 3. Cyclic, 4. Daring, 5. Visual and 6. Anchored.**

The 10 steps are a guideline and should be implemented situationally:  
**1. Determine Scope, 2. Create Vision, 3. Plan the change programme, 4. Plan the Cycle, 5. Observe, 6. Understand, 7. Design, 8. Implement, 9. Learn and 10. Close the Programme.**

See the picture as well: in the outer circle you **manage the programme**, in the blue you **manage the cycle** and in the inner circle you **change the company**.

It is interesting to plot the change management framework's principles and 10 steps (10s) on the Eneco transformation like we also did at KPN. The programme is still running, so closure at Eneco is also not opportune yet and "anchored" is therefore not complete as well. For the rest some observations can be made:

- First "**Create Vision**" is well done. The external need for internal transformation was strongly put forward in Eneco's strategy. Which was quite "**Daring**" too and definitely took some guts.
- With respect to "**People involvement**" the transformation was started top down, by the executive level. After which the organisation and staff were intensively involved in how the new way of working should be put in practise.
- Although agile is very "cyclic", the agile transformation itself does not appear to be run like that. There is some development potential in there for the next phases of change. Some "10s" steps could be of help to get this done. To "**Plan the change programme**" could be made more explicit. The same counts for the mini cycles of "**Observe**", "**Understand**", "**Design**" and "**Implement**". I would suggest doing so when evaluating the current transformation progress. It could offer an explicit learning ("**Learn**") opportunity going forward.
- There is some similarity with the KPN transformation. There the conclusion was also the management of the programme itself could have been more structured and more agile. Which sounds ambidextrous. Like KPN, Eneco also looked at different models and integrated internal and external best practises in the programme in an intuitive and practical approach. That is not necessarily a bad thing. In a way our change management framework is also based on various best practises. But the programme management of running an agile transformation could be more specific.
- A very helpful and nice Eneco best practise for managing the change of the company is the usage of "internal agility potential assessments". Giving some indication of the appetite for agile working in the current workforce including the management and leadership levels. I deliberately say "appetite" since learning agility can also be developed if people want to.