

Voerman, international removers (Netherlands)

Introduction to the company and its activities

Voerman Removers International is a dynamic, profitable company with many years of experience in the field of personal and office moves, art handling, facility services, furniture and archive storage, together with a package of supplementary activities. Voerman was founded in 1986, in 2003 they took over Abbink removers, and today the company employs a total of 650 employees (some of them overseas), and has a turnover of about EUR 50 million. It operates on a worldwide level, with its base in the Netherlands and its own offices in eastern Europe. In the Netherlands they have seven locations, with the main office in The Hague.

Voerman is also a member and co-founder of the major European and global removals organizations (UTS International). Voerman International's motto is 'people relocating people' and it is a fast-growing company. As a regular supplier of moving services to many well-known and respected corporate accounts and organisations, Voerman International handles a large number of moves throughout the country.

Via the UTS network, every move is organized and handled in the most professional, economic and safe way, offering in addition the packing of small and fragile items, the disassembly and reassembly of furniture and the arrangement of other moving-related matters.

OSH, CSR and servant leadership

Seven years ago Voerman commenced implementation of the 'servant leadership' philosophy. In tackling issues such as prevention of illness and reintegration, they were convinced of the importance of treating employees well and keeping them motivated and happy. Voerman has undertaken several initiatives related to OSH in the past, but what they missed was a general outline, or 'link' between the initiatives. The concept of 'servant leadership' provided them with a framework for relating initiatives to each other and making a connection between them. Servant leadership means 'serving customers, suppliers, colleagues, your company, your family, your surroundings, your society and your environment and, last but not least, your future'. As such, not only the manager takes responsibility, but also everybody else.

The transport sector is physically very demanding and a relatively high percentage of employees suffer lower back problems or other physical injury, whether it concerns drivers, packers, movers or administrative personnel. It is clear that a highly educated office employee needs a different approach to that of a mover or a packer. Therefore, for Voerman it is very important to measure effectively if the message is well understood by all employees. For this reason they have also joined the pilot project 'investors in people' (originated in the sector organization TLN (Transport and Logistiek Nederland).

It should be clear that servant leadership is not only about 'being nice' to each other. Voerman uses this principle in a very hard and competitive transport sector. Servant leadership is about being clear and being professional and it is very practical. According to Herman Wijffels (SER), CEOs that are only interested in shareholder value will never take extra initiatives in OSH. What is needed are inspiring, motivated leaders that are often seen in SMEs. For Voerman, the concept of servant leadership is definitely an aspect of CSR and their ambition is also to disseminate the concept across the Netherlands as well as Europe.

External and internal stakeholders

The decision to invest in 'servant leadership' was taken by management without external pressure (such as from government) except for the customers. To date, it has proven to be a good way for distinguishing the company from its competitors. Customers are enthusiastic, which makes it a commercial success and companies tend to work together with others in which they recognise their own principles.

Voerman claims to work with the 'best employees' which is written clearly on the back of some removal vans. The intention is to do this for every van, however this also makes the company vulnerable to criticism by creating high expectations.

Corporate vision on CSR

While visiting the United States seven years ago, Mr Voerman himself ran into the inspiring initiative of 'servant leadership'. This initiative exactly suited his need for more 'inspiration' in his work: a leadership model based on teamwork, a sense of common interest and ethical and caring behaviour for the individual. A model that

provides an understanding that a leader is most effective when he or she is serving others: employees, customers, the community and, for this purpose, the organisation itself.

The main elements of this model are as follows.

- Style, courage and quality: working in fixed teams, where know-how is coupled with respect and good fellowship, resulting in the best possible service. Large amount of responsibility and involvement felt by all employees provides satisfaction and pleasure in their work.
- Satisfied customers are the mainspring of an ethically responsible process of innovation and quality control, partly achieved through regular training courses.
- A guarantee of good working conditions and safety for all employees during the execution of their duties, thus contributing to continuity of service.
- Environmental care as an important part of their policy based on a minimum of material harmful to the environment, recycling packaging materials whenever possible, energysaving measures, etc.

The profit, planet, as well as the people aspects of CSR are embedded in the company's philosophy. Although not explicitly stated, the implementation of CSR has been one of the main drivers to implement the model of 'servant leadership'.

A precondition of implementing such principles in a company is that 'things are going well': there needs to be a good atmosphere, good working conditions need to be pursued 100 %, there needs to be a qualitative human resource policy and you have to be successful.

Implementation

The concept of servant leadership is about serving the customer, serving suppliers, serving clients, serving colleagues; also serving your family and your environment and finally yourselves. Servant leadership is a way of expressing CSR.

The challenge is to translate the vision of one similar view that is recognisable for everybody. Sometimes it is very hard. For example, how do you explain that lay-offs are part of the idea of a healthy company? 'Investors in people' (IiP) facilitates making the concept of a healthy and servant organisation more tangible. IiP asks for clear ambitions, clear roles, being respected, equal opportunities for development, and being directed based on these principles. Voerman presents this philosophy regularly in the media.

Voerman tries to translate the concept of 'servant leadership and CSR' into practical projects and activities, such as the '50 + project'. Older employees receive more attention and respect via several types of training, a mentoring system, guidance of new employees by older employees, etc. As part of IiP and servant leadership, job reviews and appraisals are now held a lot more frequently and several new training initiatives have been introduced. A few times each year an external company provides training on CSR and 'servant leadership' to keep the concept vivid and tangible. These training sessions are for office personnel, as well as for the field organisation, such as the drivers. Training goals include giving feedback on, for example, unsafe situations, reporting deficiencies to management, customers and supplier and being conscientious about it.

In the short term, Voerman wants to make all goals tangible by making them SMART (such as, feedback within seven days). Managers are called into account for their coordination and registration of reports and feedback.

Drivers and barriers

The question is: 'Why do some companies perform better than others?' Even in times of recession (such as 1995) Voerman was growing, because of the attention given to the individual employee (for instance, a fitness club, creative activities, etc.). What were their initial drivers?

- They tried to make the company a 'happy company', without giving the idea that 'it is all fun'. Being the 'best company' to work for attracts high quality people and gives a feeling of inspiration and motivation.
- Customers want to know who exactly is moving their furniture and ISO certification is relatively widespread and does not give extra value. CSR provides a long-term relationship by giving a little extra and by providing creative solutions, by doing new things.

What were the barriers to overcome?

- Vulnerability: people call you to account regarding your promises.
- Good and concise communication: they learned to know the importance of being clear and have SMART messages.
- Good communication is needed with external stakeholders.
- Competencies: people need to have a drive for development.

Guidance and support to employees in the field

It is a real challenge to keep the ideas of servant leadership alive in all parts of the company. In the field particularly, it is difficult to make the influence of servant leadership effective. Different people have different views.

This can lead to resistance, as in the following cases.

- There are several initiatives that seem to be separate initiatives and Voerman is trying to link them into one framework. For employees who do not see the link between different programmes, it is difficult to get commitment to the programme. Coherence between the initiatives is very important, as it gives a holistic picture.
- Different norms and values: some employees tend to be more aggressive or lazy.
- Motivation of field workers (the removers). It has been seen in the past that unsatisfied movers have a higher degree of sick-leave. It is important to really listen to their comments, for example if they want to work at the weekends, but it is also difficult to motivate them to give comments.
- The mentoring projects did not succeed, because of an unrelated organisational issue: in reality, team composition varies too much to give the bonuses for good mentorship on a fair basis.

Relationship with existing policies and management systems

Voerman International is ISO 9001-2203 certified and is approved by the Dutch Moving Association (Erkend Verhuizer). Apart from ISO, Voerman is a certified FAIM/ISO organization and is a member of the industry bodies FIDI and OMNI (www.omnimoving.com). The IIP certification is not a goal; it's about the commitment of people, the improvement of feedback, listening and putting action on it.

The added value of CSR, also in relation to OSH

Voerman's message is 'we are working with the best people' and, in logistics services, the quality of the service and the people involved is a critical issue for creating a distinct image/profile. It has proven to be a successful formula and it builds long-term relationships. When customers are satisfied, they return and ask for additional services; several of which have been added in the past years.

The management of the company realises that they have to give a good example and Mr Voerman feels that his behaviour is monitored critically. He needs to account for every decision he makes, even in these easier economic times. For example, in the case of lay offs, salary rounds, and making new deals, the important thing is to do right, to be fair and to act honestly. That does not mean simply to be nice and friendly all the time. We started a dialogue with our customers about our vision on CSR and this leads to very high expectations. But still, as human beings, everybody makes mistakes sometimes. What we do, if it happens, is apologise

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