

MAKING MISTAKES BRINGS SUCCESS



Maasstad Ingenieurs, an engineering firm based in the Netherlands, specializes in solving technical problems in infrastructure installations, automation, energy supply, and network management. They serve as the vital link between (semi-)governmental agencies and implementing parties, working hand in hand towards a mobile and sustainable Netherlands. Inspired by Ricardo Semler's book *Maverick*, Johan Bel and Bram ten Klei, and Pieter Steenkamp founded Maasstad Ingenieurs on the Semco Style Principles. Staying true to their engineering roots, they started their journey by conducting experiments and creating learning opportunities from each mistake. This is their story.

As a member of Ingenieursgroep Nederland, Maasstad Ingenieurs actively collaborates with Amstelland Ingenieurs and Van Holland Consultancy to deliver services across the entire life cycle, from design, installation, and maintenance to overall asset management. Their approach and core values align with the principles of Semco Style, making it a perfect match for their leadership and culture model. They embody a people-centric culture rooted in the belief that "you might be faster alone, but together you will go further," characterized by their values of honesty, proactivity, and predictable performance.

Starting with self-organization

Johan and Bram's journey started when they founded the company in 2021. Inspired by Ricardo Semler and Eckart Wintzen, they set out to build an organization that embodied the principles of self-organization with minimal hierarchy, providing an attractive opportunity for young talent to flourish.

"WE WANTED TO DO THINGS... JUST A LITTLE DIFFERENT"

They also knew their competitive edge would come from hiring brilliant individuals, enabling them to be their best selves and get on with the process. Johan recalls, "We selected people based on trust first and then on performance." The goal was to find individuals whom they could work with and trust with complex projects under the premise that if a specific skill or performance level was required, that could be achieved through training and coaching. Bram remembers, "Job interviews were based on getting the right feeling from a person – their drive and what they care for in their private life."

Embarking on this journey and their recruitment approach naturally fostered a culture of trust and laid the foundation for a flat organization where information flowed freely and openly. Employees were empowered to take ownership and make swift decisions, equipped with all the necessary information. While this approach succeeded in many ways, it also brought some early learning. Bram and Johan reflect, "We shared information and expected certain decisions to be made. We believed people would embrace the freedom and move forward, but without clear boundaries, they often got stuck or made poor choices." Establishing a clear framework of boundaries for action was essential in getting people to operate in this new way.

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These initial steps and mistakes made them realize the importance of aligning with and learning from like-minded individuals. Johan and Bram attended SSI's Leadership in Self-organization program, where they discovered the Semco Style Framework and Roadmap. This gave them a structured approach to organizing their company and developing their unique vision.

Making progress

Backed by the Semco Style methodology, Johan and Bram began advancing their self-management journey. They recognized the need to enhance the culture of trust they had built by setting clear boundaries for action and decision-making. Clarifying roles and tasks was essential for developing focus, and this had to be supported by agreements on achievable outcomes and creating space for regular progress review and feedback. These four focus areas strengthened their foundation and set them up for success.

Building trust

From the onset, Johan and Bram understood that trust requires a unique mindset and employed people they could trust. They also realized that maintaining the proper levels of trust is a continuous exercise and that ensuring alignment between all stakeholders is paramount. A key success factor is their investment in training. Every employee must complete the "Beginning with self-organization" course to grasp the fundamentals of Semco Style, ensuring alignment on Maasstad Ingenieurs' approach and creating a common language. All leaders must complete the advanced training program "Leadership in self-organization" to ensure they have the right tools to guide and coach team members.

"BUILDING TRUST IS EASIER SAID THAN DONE - IT TAKES TIME!"

Setting boundaries

The need for clear guidelines was identified early in their journey. However, in the spirit of self-management, Johan and Bram avoided imposing strict rules, believing this would inhibit their envisioned freedom and autonomy. The 'Boundaries for Action' framework assisted them in co-creating a communications structure

that enhanced alignment between leaders, project teams, employees, and clients. Bram recalls their analogy to explain the concept, "We used two pictures of a large swimming pool with clear boundaries vs. the sea with open waters and asked in which one would you feel most comfortable and safe. Most people indicated they would feel safe and respected within a clear structure with freedom of movement."

Rather than instructing the team on specific outcomes or behaviors, they co-created their unique 'Boundaries for Action' by asking the team "what could go wrong" and "what should we deliver." This approach allowed the team to discover the boundaries organically instead of being imposed hierarchically. They identified four critical boundaries, each with its defining criteria:

- Outcomes: Minimum thresholds and targets to achieve.
- Quality: Standards of delivered work aligned with customer requirements.
- Rules: Adherence to laws, regulations, and compliance systems.
- Behaviors: Working together and holding each other accountable.

Clearly defined roles and tasks

Maasstad Ingenieurs is organized around nine themes, each with a responsible person, specific tasks, and team members contributing to it. The nine themes they found useful are Strategy, Operations, Finance, HR, Sales, Knowledge, Marketing, Recruitment, and ICT. They specifically do not dictate how to perform the tasks but communicate expectations and desired outcomes linked to the agreed 'Boundaries for Action.' Tasks are divided amongst employees so that each person can handle the volume of the task at hand. This approach ensures commitment from team members as they contribute to the company's growth and operation.

"PEOPLE ARE PROUD WHEN THEY ARE INVOLVED IN RUNNING THE COMPANY"

Meetings with clear agreements

As Johan and Bram implemented themes, roles, tasks, and boundaries for action, they quickly noticed a spike in the number of meetings. The focus on alignment had gone too far, inadvertently slowing down the organization. Luckily, they identified the problem early on and discussed it openly within their new framework as a team. They made clear agreements on which meetings were necessary and which were excessive and guidelines to make meetings as efficient as possible.

They agreed on a primary agenda for efficient meetings, which included a Check-in, Weekly priorities (per role) & where you need support, followed by a Check-out. Meetings are also guided by basic rules, such as discussing processes rather than content, keeping each other accountable, and starting and ending on time. To ensure that meetings remain relevant and valuable, they adopted a proven Semco Style practice allowing employees to decide whether to attend a meeting. Each person should consider what they can gain from a meeting or what they can contribute - if neither is clear, then they do not attend.

Mistakes are happy accidents

In the early stages of their journey, Johan and Bram made several mistakes, which helped them to identify underlying issues and address them consistently.

"EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO THEIR OWN MISTAKES"

On a personal level, these two forward-thinking leaders share their mistakes to help others on their journeys to success:

- **Too much at once!** Never rush; remember to bring everyone along the journey with you. Take small steps and make progress gradually.
- **Do not hide failures.** When a mistake is made, share it with your employees. This builds trust and creates a psychologically safe environment, encouraging them to share their mistakes and learn from them.
- **Do not assume that trust is there from the start.** Trust takes time to build, especially with new colleagues from other organizations. Respect that they come with "historical baggage" and need to unlearn old habits.
- **Self-management doesn't mean less work for owners.** Laughing amongst themselves, Johan and Bram now know the contrary: You work even harder! As a leader with a new vision, you must share ideas, distill the vision, and create a lot of alignment. As an owner, you need to "repeat, repeat, repeat" - not only for more alignment but also to create more owners!
- **Leadership behavior is paramount.** People watch you closely! Lead by example and demonstrate the behaviors that you want to see. People model their behavior after you, so set the tone consistently.
- **Avoid micromanaging.** You might be used to doing things yourself as a leader and founder. This can translate into micromanaging in a team setup, which is not conducive to a self-managed environment. Johan and Bram found that having a coach helped them become more motivational, coaching, encouraging, and sharing leaders.
- **Do not instruct.** Instead of telling people what to do or how to do it, Johan and Bram ask, "What decision would you make if you were me?" Even if it is not exactly how they would do it, they allow it as long as it is within the agreed boundaries.
- **Mixed signals break trust.** You cannot set boundaries with clear roles and tasks and suddenly micromanage how people perform them. Trust your team to be responsible adults who will work within the boundaries.

Johan and Bram emphasized learning through experimentation and declared that "mistakes are happy accidents." This mindset sets the tone for Maasstad Ingenieurs, allowing employees to flourish with autonomy and creativity while staying aligned and engaged. They foster a psychologically safe environment that lays the foundation for self-management to grow. They are brave leaders, co-creating a new future with their team.

 Watch the full episode of this Semco Style Stories with Maasstad Ingenieurs here!

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