



Zoom-in I

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Leadership for cities

An interview with the two key people of the CURANT project on what kind of leadership is required to bring effective change in cities

Interviewer: Fabio Sgaragli

Interviewees: Marianne De Canne, Jolien De Crom



Introduction

When I first started to work with cities in generating change, my background as trainer and coach immediately pointed my attention towards the people involved first hand in that change. How is it possible to think about change at the urban level without thinking about the human component, to my view the most important ingredient of all?

Therefore, in the context of my support to the City of Antwerp as a UIA expert on the CURANT project, I immediately focussed part of my attention to the way the project and the team were being managed. As this complex project was unfolding, addressing the complex challenge of integrating migrants and refugees in the City's community, I was struck by how smoothly everything was going, and how inevitable difficulties and set backs were being faced with determination and drive. According to my opinion, a great merit has to be given to the team as a whole, with the quality and commitment of the people involved in the project implementation, and in particular to the two women leading it: Marianne De Canne and Jolien De Crom, respectively Project Coordinator and Project Manager of the CURANT project.

For this reason, my first Zoom in on the project is dedicated to them, and to exploring female leadership and the way it can help address some of the most pressing issues affecting cities today. I decided to use the interview format, as I am convinced it is better to let leaders express their views on how they operate, rather than trying to interpret it. What follows is my notes from the interview, which happened via Skype on 23 May 2018. I should like to thank you both Marianne and Jolien for the time they dedicated to me for this interview, and apologies if my ability to "register" their views has been not proven up to the challenge of conveying difficult concepts into plain language.

The interview

1. What is leadership to you? What are the characteristics of a leader in your opinion?

Jolien: Leadership is complex. Being a leader is more than just getting a title from your organisation. A leader is a motivator of a team, a coordinator of tasks / departments / partners, so a mix between taking into account content and people. A leader always needs to keep the bigger picture in his/her head and even make decisions that aren't always popular. This is still a learning process for me. I think it's hard sometimes to do good for all parties involved.

Marianne: Talking about leadership makes me think of Obama, he is an intelligent, thoughtful man, but most of all he is respectful of the people he works with. Respect for others is important because everyone is important and everybody can make a contribution. You earn respect by giving respect. You need to try to get the best out of your team, and everybody is different, so you need a different approach with each of them.

Jolien: A leader can only be good when he/she brings people together and motivates them to work together to reach a common goal. You need to share the reasons of your decisions: you hope that everybody in the team is on the same line, but that is not true. Translate decisions for your team is one of the many tasks of a leader. That creates engagement. Help them discover their talents is another one. It is not just about reaching the goals of the project, but to help your people grow and develop.

2. Do you perceive yourself as a change leader? If so what is your role as a change leader and what do you need to do differently in order to succeed?

Jolien: Yes, I see myself as a change leader. The positive thing is that CURANT started as a new project, with a new team and without any existing structures or platforms. Everything needed to be invented from scratch, and this calls for flexibility, not just from you but from the whole team, and that's the reason why it takes leadership to get things going. The role as a leader in a project like this is to make change acceptable by the team by explaining them the why, the purpose, and involve them in decision making. A leader needs to see the change that needs to happen and let his or her team brainstorm, be creative, and involve them all the way along the process. You can't just wait until something happens, you need to anticipate.

Until you start the project you really do not know how it is all going to play out, and if the actions will lead to a change. We are still in a learning process and we need to get better at what we do. I am convinced that this project will be good for participants and for the team as well. I am scared about the sustainability of the results, or that the change we want to bring to the city might be smaller than expected.

Marianne: Starting up a new project means that you have to be flexible and open to change. Moreover, with a project like CURANT, you want the outcome to be a sustainable change. You need good communication skills to work together with internal and external partners and have to be able to convince them of the goal of the project and the importance of working together to realise a good result. To start a new big project as CURANT you also need to be resilient. After a setback, you need to motivate yourself and your team to go on.

3. What kind of change would you like to see in your city as a result of CURANT's success?

Marianne: We hope that the outcome of the project will make a difference in the future. Elections will happen at the end of the year and new legislation is coming, so there are many things at present that we cannot predict and that could impact on the project. I am still hopeful. There is more focus on co-housing for students in town now, and this is one of the impacts that the project is having. Sometimes it is difficult to keep the intentions and big picture clear at all times, especially when you are so focussed in the day to day struggle. Even if my position in the organisation would change I would still want to know how CURANT is evolving.

Jolien: CURANT tests several assumptions and implements a lot of new ideas/theories. Overall, I would like the city of Antwerp to take into account the results of the project, whatever they will be. Listening to the results and do something with the findings is important. A project shouldn't just be temporary and die quietly with the final report. A project should mean something afterwards and be worthwhile even after its end. So, whatever we learn about the project, dissemination of the results is key. Of course, I would like to see that the City will invest more in unaccompanied young refugees as a result of the project, as this group remains very vulnerable. I also hope that this project will move people: neighbours, partners, Flemish youngsters, and refugees. Bringing all of them together gives me hope that they will learn from each other and will change their perception of each other as a result of the interaction.

4. What drives your motivation?

Marianne: I like finding solutions to problems, and I like facing tough challenges. I started off my career as a social worker, so I guess making a difference has always been important for me. The incident we had a few months ago, which you Fabio reported in your first Journal, was a little of a setback. I was scared that the incident would have an impact on the project, and the way it would have been perceived as a result of that by public opinion, the media and the stakeholders. That made me shift my attention to the way we can prevent problems from emerging, even though we all know that CURANT is a complex project with many variables at play at all times, including the most sensitive of all: the human factor.

Jolien: My motivation comes from the fact that you can make change happen, you can take action, that you are not fixed in a structure but you can really do something. You need to take your responsibility, and that's hard sometimes, but you also get recognised for it. This project takes me out of my comfort zone every day and I love it. Another important aspect for me is that you need to create new rules and conditions, not just adopt them from others. You need to invent new things. Of course, this must be a challenge up to your strengths, otherwise it can quickly turn into stress. Nobody tells you what to do and how to do it, and that sometimes can create anxiety, but it is part of the job of a leader.

5. How do you support the people in your team through change, especially when they have no control or choice?

Jolien: Communication and engagement are important factors. You must involve your team in the process and keep them informed. Sometimes they might have no role in the decision and therefore have no choice, but explaining them why things need to happen in a certain way and let them see the benefits of it helps. At the same time, I want to know why my team members do what they do. It is important to learn how your team members think, so that you can establish a better relationship with them. In this project, some of my team members do not depend functionally from me, but I invest time in supporting them anyway, because in that way they work better. I try to have as many conversations as possible face to face, so that you can feel their emotions, sense their human aspects. This is to me what a real team is about.

Marianne: You must work together on the change you want to see, and on the change that was not planned. This can be hard, as people usually prefer to have a lot of structure and processes in which they can feel "safe". to face uncertainty at all times. In an innovation project like this one, which is always moving and changing, focussing on the results rather than the processes gives people a sense of the impact of their hard work and gives them also motivation to go through the hard times.

6. How do I build relationships and persuade supporters, detractors, and fence-sitters to get on board with the implementation challenges the project is facing?

Marianne: I do not have a direct interaction with the political representatives, but with my department head. But I know the political sensitivities, I am more aware of it than the rest of the people that work in the project, so my role is to help the team navigate in the uncharted waters of the political landscape, and that is important because you

can help the team to make the right choices. Recognising boundaries is part of what I need to do. When I operate in my role, I always keep in mind the target group of the project, which is made of vulnerable people, and my mission to help them find their place in society. But depending on who I have in front of me, I emphasize different aspects of the project, because I know I need to “sell” it to different stakeholders in different ways, so that I can be an effective gatekeeper and create the space in which the team can operate.

7. How do you lead change in the context of the larger organizational culture of the local administration and political reality?

Jolien: This is indeed hard. I’m a small fish in a big pond and CURANT is only one of the many projects of a huge organisation. First of all, CURANT gets a lot of free space to test new things, implement new procedures, etc. I am grateful for that. In our organisation, there are many departments that have much less freedom for the implementation of new ideas. Secondly, indeed we depend of political backing: big decisions need to be approved and sometimes decisions taken elsewhere do not fit with the project’s implementation. Therefore, communication is key, and that is part of what Marianne does. Can we communicate and find a balance between what needs to be accomplished and what the board thinks is better politically? Taking time to explain to the board why change is important and support them in their decisions is key, as the project affects people’s lives.

Marianne: So far we implemented 48 individual trajectories and most of them went well. But people do not look at the 48 that went well, but to the few that went less well. It is difficult sometimes for me to get everybody on the same page. I guess keeping a communication channel open at all times helps, and working hard to align everybody to the mission and results that the project wants to achieve is very important. A lot of time has to be devoted to this, otherwise the risk is for the project to get side-lined pretty fast.

8. What are your best hopes for the project you lead?

Jolien: First of all, I hope that some of the things we are testing will continue after the project ends, that the project will lead to some changes in people’s mind-sets and that some results will be mainstreamed in our organisation. I also hope that this project will produce positive outcomes for each youngster involved. I also would like others to learn from it, so that when the project ends the knowledge will not be wasted.

Marianne: I hope that CURANT proves to be a successful approach for the integration of vulnerable groups in society; that it works out especially for them; and that it can be used as an approach on a permanent basis by the city, and by other cities in Europe as well.

Conclusions

Leadership is a complex and multi-faceted concept. At the same time, it is something that everyone can agree is important, but struggle to define or identify in a systematic way. While many might argue that they ‘know it when they see it’, few can articulate a precise process for recognizing and acknowledging effective leadership, let alone creating and then further developing it. Too often, the word leadership is associated with the near deification of ‘great people’ – charismatic individuals who

are seen to be an important lightning rod for bringing about change and positive development. **The challenge of understanding leadership is even greater when we consider the leadership of places** – such as cities, regions or small rural communities – where the task of leadership appears much more complex than in a hierarchical organization, such as a company, central government department or city administration. But leadership is exercised everyday by many people at all levels of society, in their daily lives and professions. Beyond historical accounts, the world is full of “ordinary” people making extraordinary things happen.

What this interview teaches me is that in order to lead change in complex urban systems, leaders operating within local administrations need to be able to display strength and compassion at the same time, balance rationality and emotions when dealing with people, see the present but learn from the future as it unfolds when facing tough challenges. Within complex systems, the work of a leader is about recognising diversities (of talent, worldviews and characters) and be able to work effectively leveraging diversity, rather than trying to simplify it. Complexity is the resultant of different forces pulling in a variety of directions with different speed, so mastering the ability to read those forces and be able to steer them, rather than control them, makes it possible to generate new things and bring them into the world.

The UIA programme, with its large-scale experimentations for positive change in many EU cities, represents a unique testing ground for understanding the leadership required to implement innovative solutions to crucial urban challenges. Whilst great attention is posed to reflect on policy design and innovation, and the mechanics behind change processes, **little attention is still devoted to reflecting on the human qualities necessary to carry on this kind of exercise** and to see them through until the end of the projects. **Yet, it is teams of people behind UIA projects**, and the success of those projects depends greatly on their skills and competences, as well as on their leadership traits. Therefore, I hope this output can be a useful tool to help other civil servants in EU cities to reflect on their own experience when trying to carry out innovation and change in their contexts, and might inspire others to work on their personal development in order to become more able to exercise leadership for positive change in their communities.



Left: Jolien De Crom; Right: Marianne De Canne

The CURANT project

The CURANT project seeks to provide integrated services for unaccompanied young refugees once they reach adulthood and are no longer entitled to benefit from social protection as an unaccompanied minor. It will combine co-housing and social integration schemes with volunteer buddies (young local residents aged 20-30 years old) for one to one integration and circular integrated individual trajectories. A total of 66 co-housing units will be set up through purchase, renovation and private renting. In these units, a minimum of 75 unaccompanied young refugees will cohabit with Flemish buddies for at least 1 year. The buddy helps the refugee with different aspects.

The refugees are intensively guided during the whole project, on different levels such as through a social network and integration, education, independent living, language learning, leisure time, psychological counselling and professional activation. During the project, the University of Antwerp measures the impact of the cohousing and intensive support on the integration of the young refugees.

The project aims to help the target group with education, training and work, creating a network of supportive relations and dealing with (war) trauma. The refugees transcend their status as welfare beneficiaries and are able to create a good future in Antwerp. In turn, their success stories set an example for their peers as they personify an effective integration. Positively integrating young refugees to society contributes to a more harmonious urban community and an increased public safety.

The buddy's will sharpen their intercultural qualities and take up an exemplary role as pioneers of a welcoming society. In the meanwhile, both groups benefit from living in affordable housing. The main partners will have actively acquired expertise on working with the target group. Thus, they are able to develop cooperative working methods, allowing regular future services to be tuned.

The project on the UIA website: <http://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/uia-cities/antwerp>

The project partnership:

- City of Antwerp
- Solentra (Solidarity and Trauma) – unit of the psychiatric division of UZ Brussel
- JES vzw – 'urban lab' for children and youngsters in Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels
- Vormingplus – stimulating active participation in society
- Atlas – integration office in Antwerp
- University of Antwerp

Fabio Sgaragli

As a UIA and URBACT expert, Fabio works with cities to support them in their innovation efforts when dealing with complex urban challenges. With over 20 years of experience in leadership for innovation, Fabio works for Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, a European think tank on local economic development.



Urban Innovative Actions

Les Arcuriales
45D Rue de Tournai
F - 59000 Lille

+33 (0)3 61 76 59 34
info@uia-initiative.eu
www.uia-initiative.eu

Follow us on **Twitter**
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and on **Facebook**

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This Zoom-in, written by a UIA Expert, captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. It is part of the capitalisation and dissemination activities of the UIA – Urban Innovative Actions Initiative.