

Training Program Brings Huntsman Teams Together



**“The things we
don’t talk about”**

allied forces

In 2019, the polyurethane division of chemical company Huntsman introduced the Global Excellence Team (GET). It plays an overarching role in sharing knowledge among all its production sites. The team can be deployed for specific issues and then becomes temporarily part of local management. Such a process requires coordination and trust. To strengthen both teams and improve collaboration, the Dutch production site Allied Forces was called upon.

Huntsman is a global player in polyurethane, a substance used in numerous products in our daily lives, such as insulation, automotive interiors, mattresses, chairs, and shoes. One of the production sites is located in the port of Rotterdam, where a value of tens of millions of euros must be processed safely and efficiently on a daily basis.

Kal Khogali (Operations Director Europe) and **Nanneke de Wolff** (Global Excellence Director) realized that their teams needed to create an alliance. Symbolically, Nanneke proposed to Kal at the launch of the GET. “Just like in a relationship, we and our teams need to get a good understanding of each other,” says **Nanneke**, “*our strengths and weaknesses, our different roles, and how these contribute to the joint company mission.*”

Kal: “*The danger of such close collaboration is that people may start to stake out their territory and monitor it. They might feel threatened in their position. Resentment and unwillingness to move forward can arise. The idea is that the teams collaborate when an operational situation requires it. To make the most out of this collaboration and make it sustainable, it had to be clear that we all have the same goal and that we all need each other.*”

To ensure the establishment of a common goal and effective collaboration, the assistance of Allied Forces was enlisted. Individual discussions, group sessions, and an external venue were now set up as the focus of their program. Main objective: Teams working together with confidence and alignment. The future state, in the vocabulary of the allied forces

Marieke Plas, **Dennis van Huizen**, and **Armand van Velzen** facilitated the process from Allied Forces. **Armand:** “*Our task was to accelerate the collaboration between the two teams. They each have their own dynamics that need to be optimally aligned. Not by putting pressure on one team, but by extending a helping hand. What can you do for the other?*” **Marieke** adds, “*A production site like Huntsman Rotterdam is a complex playing field, with a lot of pressure. The danger was that the teams would be on islands, unaware of each other.*”



Nanneke: *“It can sometimes feel uncomfortable to ask for help. In the initial training sessions, we worked with core quadrants. It became visible what everyone’s so-called allergies are. I discovered that a dominant culture in certain settings can trigger resistance in me. For me, it’s important not only to talk on a rational level but also to address feelings and energy. The ‘elephant in the room,’ the things we don’t talk about. The fact that vulnerability is needed to address and discuss the elephant makes it much more powerful. We definitely noticed this during the offsite.”*

Kal: *“What really touched me during the offsite was the exercise in confessions: What does nobody know about me? The openness of everyone to share heavy, personal stories moved me. And you immediately feel what it does to a group of people: there is closeness, mutual understanding grows, and with it, trust also grows. A beautiful process, initiated by seemingly simple but very effective exercises.”*

The issue of trust deserved attention, and everyone experienced that very powerfully during the offsite. There is now a greater understanding of each other, of the different perspectives and responsibilities, and therefore, the way we need to collaborate. We had to face our own weaknesses and grow from there. The biggest learning point is that we now realize this, that we name it and discuss it.

Nanneke: *“I have to say what I feel. That became my mantra after the preparatory conversations. It’s quite confronting to put that into practice. That vulnerability makes a big difference when shared with colleagues. Such an observation obviously also impacts them. And so, even more issues came to the table, more elephants in the room. A completely new experience for all of us.”*

Kal: *"I've learned that laughter is sometimes a way to release tension. But sometimes, when something isn't right, we laugh it away like that. This happens a lot in groups and is characteristic of the culture. I recently applied this insight in a Leadership Team of which I'm a part. I spoke it out to everyone's surprise, and you could hear a pin drop. It's a bit uncomfortable, but it also shows that you've made a crucial point. And that moves the team forward. I'm much more aware of that now; I won't let those moments pass anymore."*

Nanneke: *"Indeed, it touches the foundation of a good relationship with each other."*

During the offsite, there was a serious test of how people react to tension.

Kal: *"Very realistic, and the tension was stretched a little further each time. This resulted in interesting feedback and meaningful discussions. Behavior became visible. Who stepped forward, who didn't? Is the problem resolved, and how? In a specific exercise, we first asked the question: Who has experience with this? Often, that question isn't asked. Very enlightening. People don't automatically make the right choices under stress. That's a fact."*

Nanneke: *"Three teams had to devise their own plan to build a wooden structure. It was about the fastest time. If you didn't make enough progress, another team could take over. In our case, this was chosen, which meant that one team was excluded. I struggled with that because I'm very results-oriented but within a team context. It bothered me, and those who saw this in me didn't address it."*

Kal: *"I learned from that. I wanted to react, but I didn't. It didn't seem like the right moment. But you would have appreciated it, even if you might have reacted strongly. I only came forward with it a day later. For me, this exercise has once again made it clear how competitive the human mind is. When you put people in teams and ask them to do something as quickly as possible, they start competing with each other. That's human nature."*

Nanneke: *"Very remarkable, because it showed that sometimes we behave as individuals instead of as one team. And we should strive together for the best collective performance! So, you have to control that natural competitive drive and make positive use of it. Very interesting given our situation with two teams that regularly interact."*

Kal: *"During the offsite, our teams collaborated very well with each other. It was friendly and amicable. And you can see it since then in the workplace, people approach each other much more easily. Now, we must not lose that momentum. We need to build on the foundation, and it's up to us to continue setting a good example. Because I know that sometimes we promise more than we can deliver. That danger also arose during the sessions after the offsite. I saw that as a wake-up call: this is a journey."*

An interesting test case was the final session of the program, where success would be celebrated collectively. Not so much interesting because of the session itself, but because of what preceded it.



Nanneke: *“A day before, we received the message that Kal wouldn't be present due to personal reasons, but that the session would go ahead as planned. Kal's team had decided this without consulting us. Initially, I thought it was natural, but as time passed, it bothered me. And that was exactly what we had trained together. That's why I decided to share my feelings before meeting with the Allied Forces, especially as I began to realize that this was indicative of how we interact with each other. The facilitators from Allied Forces were empathetic and flexible enough to focus on the incident during the session. After all, we can learn the most valuable lessons from real-life situations. In this case: Treat each other as equals. Just like in a marriage.”*

Armand: *“During the program, many participants experienced significant realizations. That's very encouraging. Here and there, individual issues also surfaced. Patterns in behavior. We challenge people to simply put these issues on the table and name them. It can sometimes be tough on the content, but always with a lot of respect for the person.”*

Marieke: *“It's very understandable that people prefer to talk about content; it feels safer. But sometimes, you risk reasoning in circles, missing the point. The program has resulted in openness, which is wonderful, but it remains a challenge to sustain this in the long term. It takes time and attention.”*