

10 questions to Kees Dubbelboer

‘Kees’ temple’ as the model for the financial

Integrity, finance & accounting skills, communication and passion

By Eric Dijcks, Client Service Director, RGP

After having worked with Shell for 28 years, Kees Dubbelboer started a new adventure three years ago as the Corporate Control Manager with Alliander. A remarkable career move that does not seem to be based on a wish for gradually phasing out. “That you have the opportunity to make your own mark is one of the most appealing sides of my work.”

1. What makes Alliander a challenging company for you to work for?

“The Dutch energy sector is going through a major transition with huge implications to suppliers, grid managers and buyers. The changes go at a much faster pace than was customary in the sector. In a rather recent past, we were used to a planning horizon of 25 to 50 years; the estimated economic life of cables newly put in the ground. This traditional picture has changed dramatically. We are now dealing with decentralised power generation by private households through solar collectors. These households want to return the unused capacity to the grid, changing one-way traffic into two-way traffic. As a grid operator, we will have to use our cash flow to invest in this infrastructure. Actually, we receive a fee for managing the transmission networks. A component of that fee is linked to the interest rate on ten-year government bonds. As the interest rate on such bonds has decreased significantly, this will lead to a ten to fifteen percent decrease in our organization’s revenue next year.”

2. So you probably focused on cost reduction and efficiency?

“We explicitly choose to invest in alternative solutions rather than exclusively focusing on efficiencies and cost reduction. Actually, I don’t think cost reductions are that interesting. Efficiency, that is a keyword to us. That means performing your core processes as good as possible, with no exceptions allowed. I am actually never completely satisfied in that field, we can always do a little better.”





Kees Dubbelboer (57) is Corporate Control Manager with Alliander. He completed business economics in Groningen and graduated as a registered accountant in Rotterdam. After military service, he joined Shell, where he performed a variety of roles in a 28-year period. Among others, he worked abroad for thirteen years for Royal Dutch Shell. Before transferring to Alliander, his position was Head of Reporting at Shell Group.

3. How does Alliander respond to the major changes?

“In the form of what we refer to as Emerging Business Areas, we are working on three fields that could be key factors in power consumption in the future. These fields are related to electric mobility, sustainable area development transporting alternative and sustainable power supply to the customers, and an innovative approach allowing for realising energy savings in homes. This way, we deploy new activities in a difficult market with investment-avoiding solutions, and I dare say that we have a leading position in the sector in this respect. For people in this organization, that is a major revolution that requires the necessary attention. Simultaneously, we have noticed that these new areas make Alliander an appealing employer in the labour market.”

4. This apparently was also true for yourself. How did you come to join Alliander?

“For Shell, I was with Group Reporting when the external auditor tipped me off about the vacancy within Alliander. The outlook to be responsible for finance in the full breadth was immediately appealing. What had to happen within Alliander was already clear before my actual first day at work. From the results of an internal customer satisfaction survey, it was clear that I would have a lot on my plate. Additionally, much more so than within Shell, you have the option of making your own mark in what happens in the organization. I think that is one of the most appealing sides of my job with Alliander. When I just started in this organization, the reaction was: what should someone from Shell be doing at Alliander? Undoubtedly, many must have thought of me as a misfit using too many English words. However, I chose not to stir things up when I joined the company, but instead to pursue a consistent and transparent policy. When we had agreed on the direction in our management team, I told them to keep on track. That this would also have implications to the number of jobs was something that the MT handled with the utmost care. The fact that in the end twenty percent of our people left the company, is not something that most had considered possible. The attitude was: they will shake the tree but eventually, everyone will find a branch again.’ In spite of our due care, this was not the case.”

5. What exactly did you do?

“We started with Focused Finance, a transition programme designed to improve collaboration between Business Control, Shared Services and the other financial departments such as Tax & Subsidies, Treasury & Insurance, Corporate Control and Risk. This programme was and still is aimed at establishing a best-in-class position for the finance function within Alliander. This was not the case when I started in 2010: internal customers gave the financial function a very low pass mark of 5.5 out of 10. Additionally, benchmarking showed that efficiency was far below standard and the number of FTE for each process step was far too high. It was clear that we had to refocus and standardize. Instead of processing ledger entries everywhere in the organization, it was clear that we

had to take this activity to the Shared Service Center. And that we provided each internal customer with personalised information was also something we could not continue if a substantial efficiency improvement had to be reached. Overall, these measures have resulted in a finance staff reduction of about twenty percent. That was experienced as dramatic within Alliander.”

6. This transition will not have been completed without resistance. How did you convince people?

“I needed a symbol and chose the annual report. The 2009 report was published on 21 April 2010. I told my team that we could cut the production time of the annual report in half within three years’ time, and presented the ‘dream image’ to publish the 2012 annual report on 21 February 2013. We actually managed that, with one day to spare even. However, more importantly, the production process is now completed with much more work satisfaction and the people involved feel much more pride. The appreciation of our internal customers has also increased significantly, which is clear from the score of 7.3 out of 10. However, our ambition remains high, unabated: we are aiming for a score of at least 8. The programme has not yet been completed. The collaboration between the teams has significantly improved, but between the teams, we could do better. Towards the rest of the organization, we want much more to serve as a full business partner. For colleagues who favour tinkering with spreadsheets behind their computer, this is a revolutionary change. They are dragged out of their comfort zone.”

7. How do you do that in practical terms?

“By clarifying what such a business partner should offer in each of the many sessions. At those occasions, I like to make the drawing that has become known internally as ‘Kees’ Temple’. The foundation of the temple is formed by the four basic skills that you need as a financial: integrity, finance & accounting skills, communication and passion. In the form of four pillars I then draw the supplementary requirements you need to fulfil in your role. That is strategic insight, leadership, understanding of operational management and knowledge of how you can influence people. If I then draw a roof on the pillars, it does look like a temple.”

8. Do you really believe in the power of symbolism?

“My experience is that many people do not know what they want. They do not know their own ambition. I often discuss that. If a team member outlines an utterly vague future perspective, I send him or her back to do some homework first. I have always been very clear on my personal objectives. In a competitive environment such as Shell, this is more or less automatic. It took me to places in the world where life was not always easy. By not immediately recoiling from that, you develop the self-confidence and courage to make the next step.”

9. What is your key objective now?

“My biggest challenge here within Alliander is to set up an organization that can grow. I do not expect to spend more than a few more years here. I expect that people will rise from my team to take over my role, and I discuss that with them. I think that they are ready in about three years’ time, and then they can knock on my door. And naturally, I hope that a future CFO of this company is walking among the current potential.”

10. What would the next step be for you personally?

“After what I just said about people not knowing their own ambition, this is not what you would expect, but the truth is I don’t know. If I would know at this point, it would also not be opportune to speculate at this time. However, it is a safe bet that I will not be sitting at home or playing golf all day.”