

AN **INVITATION** TO CHALLENGE
THE "NORMAL" WAY OF WORKING

THE WAY WE **WORK**

From Canal+ France to Knowmads Hanoi:
What I have learned about collaboration so far



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Purpose of this document

Over the past years, I have had the opportunity to experience both how painful and how joyful work can be.

The painful experience came first, in working several years for a French media company that despite its shiny brand image made me a witness of so many of the things that can go wrong within an organization. Endless fights for control and power, decision paralysis, orchestrated lack of transparency, air filled with mistrust and frustration, occasional burn-outs and massive disengagement.

And then the joy, when becoming involved in leading an education organization in Vietnam - Knowmads Hanoi - with the dream to turn it into a sustainable social enterprise.

Being big enthusiasts of the work of F. Laloux “Reinventing organization”, my partners and I believed that work did not have to be as bad as I experienced it so far - and that it was up to us to **grow an organization where both business and humans will thrive.**

Today, we believe that one of our most precious asset is our “how” - the way we do what we do, the way we work together and with others. Through this short essay, my intention is to share these practices and our learnings with the world, and perhaps inspire others to reinvent the ways they work together.

Acknowledgement

Knowmads Hanoi is a collective dream. It was created in 2013 by Guus Wink; over the years, he was joined in this project by an “army of cool people” from all over the planet, who contributed to develop it further years after years. We are forever grateful for this beautiful gift that we inherited, and for all of their individual contributions.

In 2015 Narayan Silva & Steve Ryman introduced to Knowmads Hanoi “The Art of Hosting Conversations that Matter”. It is a self-organizing network of people developing participatory leadership methodologies that aim to address complex challenges through dialogue, facilitation and co-creation. Most of our practices, both in the content of our programs and in the way we work together, are directly inspired by The Art of Hosting.

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Introduction

“We are trying something else”

This is the best answer I have found so far to the dreaded question “So what exactly is it that you do at Knowmads Hanoi?”.

Our purpose is to offer a **different kind of education** - one that is co-created and conversation-based, and that focuses on things that are of the utmost importance but often neglected: self-awareness, sustainability, impactful project design and mindful collaboration.

But moreover, our wish is to **run our organization differently than the traditional organizational practices**. We found out quickly that if criticizing the way other companies operate is easy, drifting away from it and practicing something else is much harder, especially when the cold-reality of business strikes.

Luckily for us, over the past years we have been surrounded by mentors that challenged us to question what “normal” means and convinced us that it is possible to operate on different models and values that can make work productive, fulfilling and meaningful at the same time.

Part 1 - About disengagement at work

My personal experience of traditional organizations sounds like a Generation Y Cliché – because it is.

I got hired right after graduating, happy and proud to have made it into my dream-company. However, months after months, years after years, I started noticing in me this growing feeling that something was not quite right in the way things were around me.

The saddest thing I have seen? The massive disengagement. Yes, the same one that gets recognized in multiple studies, explaining how just a tiny part of the workforce is actually engaged at work. Within a few years, I could witness around me:

- fundamental professional needs not being met (unclear roles and missions, lack of resources and tools, absence of support,...)
- personal needs being ignored (need for acknowledgement, for recognition, for trust, for growth, for purpose...)
- toxic relationships being nurtured by the structure in itself (mistrust, bad-faith, fear, frustration,...).

I remember spending countless hours sitting in very strange meetings: people bored to death, eyes on their phones or computers, not being present to whatever subject was being addressed. Not really listening to one another. Often not speaking towards the purpose of the meeting, but rather to satisfy their ego. Sometimes not caring enough to actually speak up. Sometimes not daring enough.

Overall, a lagging conversation, where outcomes seemed to happen only with pain and struggle, relieving everyone from their duty of being there and setting them free to run into the next similar meeting.

Yes, something was definitely not quite right. However, I had to face the fact that it was looked as rather normal by most people around. Unpleasant, sometimes harsh, but *“well, that’s how organizations work and you might want to get used to it. Grow up.”*

But is it normal, really?

Why do the people in these rooms, whom surely have been hired for their capacity to work well, and that certainly have the ability to get into fruitful collaboration when it is about something else, have no willingness to cooperate with each other and engage in a generative conversation in this work environment?

Heads, Hands,... and Heart

In most traditional organizations, there is a strong emphasize on **head & hands** - thinking and doing.

- **Head**, first of all, because what is valued above all else is brain power. Thinking fast, analyzing, predicting, controlling.
- The counterparts are of course the **hands**: doing, doing, doing. An endless list of tasks and to-do list, to keep the machine running.

The result is actually not that bad - intellectually challenging jobs that imply a lot of crossing things off to-do list, which can keep some people running on the treadmill for a long time. What became quickly missing for me was the connection to something deeper than just using my brain at full power to complete tasks.

I was craving for meaning in my work. Not purpose (the mission of the company or of my team, which was clear and still somehow resonated in me), but *meaning*. I was craving for deeper humanity. I was craving for authenticity, for genuine connections, for psychological safety, for appreciation. And the lack of it all was keeping me from being at my full potential.

The problem? “You don’t know what you don’t know”. It’s only by changing work environment that I finally got to experience how it feels to be truly myself at a workplace, and appreciated as such. I discovered how it feels to have work-relationships based on trust and authenticity, and how it feels to work in a psychologically safe space.

Some people call this “bringing your whole self to work”. We call it working not only with our head and hands, but also with our **heart**.

I can hear from here the skeptical voice of some of the managers I ran into over the years: “*Work is work. Emotions don’t belong here. On est pas là pour faire du social.*”

For me, this has never made any sense. What gives meaning to my life, and also to my work, is the connection I create with others.

And **despite** the organization structure that did not value the practice of nurturing relationships, and often actually worked against it, we still found ways. Despite everything, during my 5 years there I had the chance to witness authentic relationships, genuine recognition and appreciation, strong desire to create and build with each other - which gave me a glimpse of what was necessary for me to thrive.

However, it really grew despite the structure and not thanks to it. And in so many cases, the binding element has been the shared massive frustration against our working environment, and the necessity to support each other in this context.

What if instead, the connection could have happened thanks to the structure, coming from a positive place and evolving into a shared enthusiasm towards the working environment, allowing us to be and create together on an authentic way?

At Knowmads Hanoi, we never believed in separating work and “real life”. For us, work *is* the real life. There does not have to be a separate identity with which we show up at the workplace. Being ourselves at work is not only tolerated, but also celebrated.

Far beyond reaching financial sustainability at all cost, our very first priority at Knowmads Hanoi has always been to grow a space where we would consciously nurture relationships and practice authenticity and empathy. Our motivation was actually very pragmatic: it came straight from a conviction that it is one of the major foundation thanks to which **effective collaboration** could emerge, and thanks to which our business will thrive.

However, easier said than done. Setting up such a deep culture of self-expression and listening within a work context is difficult. Even more difficult is to maintain it when things actually get rough.

It requires a strong intention, ground rules, and a lot of practice.

Part 2 - Our practices

a. Getting started

In (re)starting Knowmads, the best move we ever made was to delay action. For the first few weeks of our time together, we purposely split our time between tangible work and deep conversations. Since then, the conversations have never stopped.

Conversations on the purpose of the project: What are the needs we see out there that we could respond to? What are the ones we want to focus on? How do we define then the purpose of our organisation, in relationship to these needs? How much do each of us resonate with this purpose? Does it seems like the best way to invest our time and energy?

Conversations about each others' intentions and expectations: What makes each of us care about the purpose? What are we looking for in this adventure, what are our intentions? What do we wish to accomplish? What do we wish to learn? How much can each of us offer? What do each of us need?

Conversations about values and principles: What is important for each of us when working within a team, and that the others should know about? What are the key principles we want to define for our team? What are the practices we can implement to live up to these principles?

These questions are powerful ones and they intentionally invite deep conversations. They also require a long time to be answered. It can certainly be the most frustrating thing of all, when starting a project and having so much energy to do and create, to have to spend countless hours in conversations instead, week after week. However, the outcome for us has been the most valuable resource an organization can have: a strong and clear purpose, a shared agreement to commit to, and a basis of trust in each other.

It might sounds like common sense. However, in my experience in the “traditional” corporate world, projects were starting and new people were joining teams without any of these conversations ever happening. Having now experienced something different, I’m wondering: What could become possible if paying attention to these foundations would be part of the managers’ role?

b. Checking-in

Without a doubt, this is the practice Knowmads Hanoi is the most known for. We do not start any conversation, meeting or work session without a proper check-in.

So what is it exactly? A check-in starts with a question that is offered to all, followed by a round of sharing of individuals' answers to it. It seems pretty basic; but much more than a simple round of answers to a question, a check-in is an invitation to connect with the purpose of the conversation that is going to happen, and with our own personal intention towards it.

Why doing so? We all share a dream to never again sit in a purposeless meeting where participants are not actively engaged - the "autopilot meetings". This process is an invitation to be fully present in the conversation, and a powerful way to bring consciousness into individual intentions.

On another level, similar to checking a suitcase before boarding a plane, a check-in is also an opportunity for each of us to arrive, pause, breathe and share what we are carrying on that precise moment, in order to board hands-free into what's coming next.

Some examples of our favorite check-in questions:

- "What do you hope to get out of this meeting / conversation?"
- "What intention are you bringing to this meeting / conversation?"
- "Why are you here today?"
- "Why is the topic of (...) important to you?"

c. Checking-out

Same as we start meetings / conversations with checking-in, we practice ending them with checking-out.

The process is similar to checking-in, but the intention behind it is different. The purpose of checking out is to bring a proper closure to whatever was happening before - bringing back some consciousness, reflecting on what has just happened and building intentions before dispersing.

On a second level, it also serves the purpose by making sure that no one leaves the conversation without having been offered the opportunity to be heard.

Some examples of our favorite check-out questions:

- “How are you leaving this conversation?”
- “What do you need to say to leave this conversation in peace?”
- “What do you hope for this project?”
- “What are your next steps?”
- “What are you learning thanks to this project?”

d. Checking-up

Checking-in and checking-out are processes that are centered on the purpose of the upcoming meeting / conversation.

Checking-up is a different practice. It is also a round of sharing but the question is directed towards us, and simply serves the purpose of surfacing how everyone is doing, and of deepening our relationships with each other.

We start *every working day* with a check-up, and we often squeeze some in the middle of hectic days, every time we sense that there is a need for it.

Similar practices exist in most companies - they are called “morning coffee”, “lunch break”, or “time before the meeting starts”. It is all these spaces where people can build connection with each others and grow their personal relationships.

However, in my experience at least, these informal spaces are not always inclusive. They do not always bring together the right people, or connect the ones that might benefit from stronger relationships with one another. And they are not always enough, especially when the workload diminishes the available time for it.

For us, this “checking-up” practice comes from a strong intention of consistently and consciously growing a space of trust and authenticity, knowing that collaboration will benefit from it on the long term.

Knowing that this space exists and is “available” on a daily basis, we do not have to carry frustrations, doubts and fears, and have them polluting our work. In this space, we also have the opportunity to receive the appreciation, hopes, intentions of others, and find an extra source of energy in it. Last but not least, it allows us to adapt smoothly as a team, in an evolving way, to anything happening for each of us on a daily basis.

Some examples of our favorite check-up questions:

- How are you feeling?
- What is your intention for today day and where do you need support?
- What do you need to share to be present?

e. Handling complex, difficult or over-heated conversations

Sharing how we are doing or our intention for the upcoming meeting is one thing. But how do we handle the difficult conversations that always arise over time? Those conversations that are on complex or crucial topics, those conversations where we have opposite views and opinions, those conversations where ego might get triggered, where relationships might be hurt?

To navigate such conversations, and whenever we feel it becomes necessary, we use a very simple tool: a “**talking piece**”, that we put at the center of the table. It embodies the purpose of the conversation, the question we are stuck on and trying to answer.

It mostly serves as a reminder that the invitation is to speak towards the purpose and in support of the purpose, not to each other or in support of one's opinions or beliefs.

For whoever holds the talking piece, the invitation is to **speak with intention** – with words that serve the purpose in the middle. For whoever is not holding the object, the invitation is to **listen with attention** – not waiting for their turn to speak and contradict, but listening to understand, with an open mind.

The beauty of this practice?

Simply **slowing down**, and starting to truly listen to one another - while keeping the purpose of the conversation in the center. It also assures that **every voice** can and will be heard, and that decisions will take into account all the information and energy available around the table. Last but not least, it **gives space** for everyone to reflect before speaking – more consciously considering every word being said, and less guided by ego and personal agendas.

Thanks to this practice, difficult conversations no longer have to be feared or avoided. This practice indeed offers a container in which tensions, discomforts and disagreements can emerge, be voiced, be heard and be reacted to in a healthy way.

Those are actually a gift to the process, since they come from the diversity of opinions that is necessary to operate in a complex system. It is the sum of these

different perspectives, and the capacity of the group to hear them all and build on them that we call “collective intelligence”, and that is far above the addition of individual capacities to solve the problem.

It does not mean that the problem will be solved and that consensus will be reached -it means that the best conditions possible will be in place, and that whatever emerge will be the best thing that could have emerged.

Reflecting back on how many difficult yet crucial conversations did not happen at my previous workplace, due to fear of having to sit in uncomfortable conversations where the outcome is out of control, or from lack of acknowledgement that some people’s strong opinions can be a gift rather than a curse when proper conditions are in place. How much collective intelligence did we miss out, and what might have been different with conditions to hold such conversations?

f. Reflecting on our learnings

At Knowmads Hanoi, we have a strong shared intention to be a “learning organization” – an organization that put the learnings of the team as one of our biggest priorities, and that continuously transforms itself accordingly.

One thing we repeat over and over: “you don’t only learn by the experience. You mostly learn by reflecting upon the experience.”

After every workshop, contract, project, or important internal event, we sit together and share what we have learned, what went well and what we could do differently next time. And we do that every time.

It may seem like a very logical thing to do, but the truth is that in five years in my former company, I had never heard of such a process. After any project ended, we were just jumping to the next one. I often wonder what could have been possible if we had just taken the time to sit together after each project, and reflect on these very simple questions “what have we learned? What could we do different next time?”

For us, this process allows us first of all to share knowledge with each other, and accelerate its spreading across people in the organisation.

Secondly and as important, it gives a whole different meaning to what has been done. Much more than just crossing off a project from a roadmap, making sense collectively of the learnings is an opportunity to bind together, and bring a proper, meaningful closure.

In our case, this process has allowed a few of our “failed” projects to become the catalyst for a much stronger dynamics in our organisation. Instead of all the blaming, judging, regretting, we jumped directly to celebrating the learnings- acknowledging them, writing them down, reflecting on them - and moving on with big hopes for future success.

g. Sharing appreciation

In the company I used to work in, we got one performance evaluation per year, in which we reviewed our achievements with our manager and set goals for the next year.

I never questioned what purpose it was serving, or if it was really enough, until we started doing things differently within our team at Knowmads.

Despite all other priorities there can be, we do our best to keep an intentional time for an overall “appreciation process” a few times per year, in order to take a step back from the work, and reflect collectively on our collaboration with each other.

Each individual is invited to express how he / she sees himself / herself in this collaboration and how it has been working with others in the past months.

The others people in the team have then the opportunity to mirror this sharing, in expressing how they appreciate the collaboration with this person: what is going well, what they see him / her bringing to them and to the team. And also give some insights of what could help them work even better with him / her. And last but not least, what they wish to say “sorry” for - thus making sure that nothing remains unsaid.

These moments are incredibly precious: They help each of us gain awareness on what we are good at and to find the drive to do even more of it, as well as acknowledging how each person is important to the organization.

It is also a moment of real authenticity, when we can all recognize the inevitable challenges of working with other human beings, and to celebrate the fact that we are all practicing and learning how to do it better - not being afraid of saying “sorry”.

h. Finance & consciousness

One thing has been constant for our first year of work together: we have never made an amount of money that was even slightly close to the value of our work and the collective effort we put into it.

Knowmads Hanoi's purpose is to create conditions for growth & wise actions, through programs and workshops. Our programs are especially designed for young people looking for their purpose in life and willing to have a positive impact, but not knowing where to start or how to get support.

Once this is stated, one issue arises immediately: How can we include those who feel very strongly about joining but cannot afford it? How much of our own financial sustainability can we sacrifice to work towards our purpose? But how much are we endangering the viability of our organisation if we don't pay ourselves a decent amount?

A lot of social entrepreneurs or non-profit workers can likely resonate with these questions. We believe that they are linked to the contradictions between operating in a traditional economic system and at the same time practicing a new way of working and being - where money is no longer an end goal, but remains simultaneously a tool and a boundary.

As we started over with Knowmads Hanoi, we knew money would be a tough subject, and we were ready to face it. Like many entrepreneurs, we obviously firmly believed in the value of what we wanted to create, and assumed that our work would pay-off financially. We also had a trust in the universe - a belief that with such a strong purpose and commitment, abundance would come. And even if it didn't we were clear that the most important part of our journey was our own learnings about practicing healthy collaboration.

Practicing healthy collaboration for us also meant working consciously with money, well aware that nothing damages relationships and creates conflict more effectively than unconsciousness around resources.

What do we mean by “Working consciously with money” ?

For us, it means departing from the usual pattern of secrecy, scarcity and competition, and replacing it with a strong belief that it does not have to be that way as we move to a place of **transparency**, **generosity** and “**fairness**”.

We definitely had to deal with the lack of resource, and to cope with it collectively month after month. We were constantly facing the following questions: how do we divide money? Do we divide it equally? Do we divide it according to each one's contribution? Or do we divide it according to each one's needs? How can we make sure that needs and expectations are met? What does “fairness” really mean?

The way we do it each month has been brought to us by our friends and mentors Tracy and Narayan.

It starts with a check-in, where everyone is invited to share where he or she stands in relation to money at the moment, to get it out there.

- *“How do you feel seeing the amount we made this month?”*
- *“Is it frustrating you, worrying you, or in the contrary do you feel grateful and hopeful?”*
- *“Are you personally in a place of need or in a place of abundance?”*

We then take the whole amount to be shared and break it into chunks of 10\$ (or 20\$, or 50\$, and hopefully in the future 100\$), symbolized by playing cards. We divide it equally, so that we all start with the same amount. We then take a minute to reflect individually on how much each would feel comfortable having at the end of process.

And then we open the floor for five minute of giving each other cards.

As recognition for specific work during the past month(s).

As financial support for the month to come.

As genuine appreciation of each others.

And after five minutes, we each count our cards and get the equivalent in “salary”.

The beauty of this give and receive process: since the cards circulate non-stop from one person to another for 5 minutes, we get to **offer much more** and to **receive much more** than the total amount that is available.

It does not make money appear magically, does not solve the lack of resource, and does not resolve the question of “how do I pay my rent this month”.

But what it does is to create a culture of full transparency, generosity and gratitude - which I have very rarely seen in any traditional organizations, even though they have usually much larger amount to offer.

One massive learning: when it comes to the relationship with money within an organization, what makes the difference is not so much the amount available, but rather the conscious practices around it.

i. The skeptic corner

As one of our friends and supporters once put it “I discovered this Circle Practice at Knowmads and immediately thought it was a dumb practice. And the more people we had in the circle the dumber it got. However, with time and persistence, I got to understand how powerful it actually is”.

So yes, indeed, all these practices mean that things sometimes go slowly. Taking time every morning to “check-up” with each others, and adding 10 to 20 minutes of round sharing before and / or after each important meeting and conversation - so basically every day - adds up to a lot of “just talking” at the end of the year.

But could we really have gotten more things done without these practices? And would the quality had been the same? We will never know for sure; What we know is the way we did it worked. We went very far very quickly and shared a strong feeling of happiness and fulfillment doing so - is that not the most that any organization could dream of?

It has not been rainbows and unicorns every day though, and we had our fair share of rough times. However, every times we got caught in a pattern of working compulsively for an extended period of time and getting slowly but surely burned out, our practices always came in the way to called us back to the center.

- What is the purpose of our organization again? Is what we are doing at the moment really serving this purpose or not?
- What are our principles again? Are we staying true to them?
- Are we working with consciousness towards ourselves, others and the organizations at the moment? What is it that needs to change?

In retrospect, I realize that we did not really **build** a company, following a mechanistic plan. Instead, **we grew** a company. As if we were farmers, we invested a lot of time taking care of the “**field**” - our relationships, our structure, our practices - nurturing them, and sitting with patience and acceptance while the organization grows.

Marketing strategies, social media content, financial business plans,...Those are actually the easy part. The real work here is has been to constantly cultivate and influence the conditions for good collaboration to emerge.

Part 3 - Our organization structure

Building pyramids, going to the moon, running a business. Whether big or small, each time a project requires the involvement of several people, it is a small miracle when it actually happens.

The most familiar structure for getting things done is the hierarchical one - the pyramid. Some people at the top give orders, and the chain of command goes down to the bottom for execution. Those at the top have control, and those at the bottom have clarity.

It has proven efficient for thousands of years in simple systems and in some complicated systems, but it seems irrelevant for today's complex adaptive systems we are operating in.

First of all, the amount of information and parameters to consider for wise decision, especially in a fast-changing environment, makes it impossible for a few people at the top to know everything, and even more to decide as quickly as necessary.

Moreover, for the people at the bottom, being deprived of involvement in the decision-taking process and the ability to make things move forward might become a strong source of frustration, and lead to a massive waste of energy and potential.

Last but not least, it is a structure whose purpose is explicitly to get things done. It does not exist to grow relationships, create engagement or bring meaning - hence it does not resonate with what today's young workforce is actually looking for in an organization.

Where can we go from there? Is it possible to imagine a structure that would not only enable us to get things done, but to actually do it with flexibility, engagement & happiness?

One framework that we have been introduced to and that we rely a lot on is called the "Circle – Triangle - Square". We have been using it for Knowmads, as well as for organizing Art of Hosting Training and launching The Learning Hub.

The “Circle – Triangle – Square” model. Conversations are great, getting things done is even better.

The **Circle** represents the organization as a whole.

In a circle as in our organisation, there is no hierarchy and everyone sits as equals. Since there is no boss, we all share ownership and responsibility -which creates an environment that encourages participation, engagement and trust.

With no explicit leader, what actually leads us is the **purpose** of the organization, that everyone committed to work for, following agreements and principles that have been decided together.

The “Circle” is a form that invites **deep listening, collective intelligence** and **reflection**, and that holds a few crucial functions in an organization:

- It is first of all the guardian of the purpose and principles, calling everyone back to it when necessary.
- Secondly, it is a place for coordinating all the actions happening - the multi-head project manager - relying on the collective intelligence to guide the process.
- Last but not least, it is also a place for reflection on learnings, a place for constantly refining and revisiting the purpose and a place for processing any disturbance coming from inside or from outside of the organization.

The Circle operates with processes that invite conversations between team-members.

These conversations actually allow people to feel engaged, tapping into their need for connection and meaning. It is a place where every voice can and will be heard, spreading the power and using collective intelligence.

The Circle is definitely a wonderful place, but the danger is getting stuck in it because unfortunately, as we very quickly realised you don't get things done by talking about them.

That's when the **Triangles** come into to the pictures.

The Triangles are groups of people responsible for specific parts of the project (marketing, finance, legal, this or that specific project,...)

Once a Triangle has been formed around a task, it is fully empowered by the Circle to do what is necessary, in support of the shared purpose and in accordance with principles established in the Circle. For the sake of efficiency, the invitation is for the Triangle to self-organize independently and to take full ownership of its mission.

In exchange of this full trust, the Triangles are responsible to the full Circle for their area of work. If something comes up that makes it critical, it is their responsibility to ask for support or clarification. It then goes back to a shared responsibility within the Circle to figure out a solution and adapt accordingly. With practice, triangles become increasingly skilled at recognizing when to act independently and when to check in with the circle; this is part of the art in this style of working.

The word “trust” keeps coming back here. Trust is indeed the fuel that keeps the whole thing running, and the oil that prevents it from breaking.

It then all come down to a simple question: **how do you build trust?** How do you create a frame where people feel safe enough towards each other to be able to invest their energy in the work, instead of in anxiety, control and silent resentment?

The last part of our model, and the one that is so often overlooked is the **Square** - the frame around the organization / project / team, that will hold it together.

In our case, this frame is the result of a never-ending process of nurturing our relationships with each other, and slowly building trust and clarity by having the conversations that matter.

- What is our collective purpose? How do our individual underlying purposes support the collective purpose? Who are we all? What are our strengths hopes, dreams, fears? What do each of us need in order to work well with others and to be fulfilled in his/her work? Where do we want to go in one month, one

year, five years, individually and collectively? How can we deal with our resources?

These conversations do not happen magically and are usually constantly pushed back by the emergency of doing daily tasks. Maintaining this dynamic on a regular basis requires a full conviction that talking to each other is often the most important and urgent task of each day: if trust and connection are the fuel of our whole model, it has to be constantly nurtured, and nothing matters more.

All the practices described above, all these things that we do, are nothing more than our fuel production system. The outcome is simultaneously fully intangible and the most precious asset of all - Trust.

Our organization as a living system

In the corporate world I came from, I cannot count the number of hours we spent working on “strategic plans”, doing our best to justify and predict, and satisfy a need for control at every level of the organization. Today, I keep wondering if it was really the best use of our time together - how many of these plans just ended up in the trash bin, and were never used?

I am not saying here that there should not be any kind of plans are unimportant. We do have a vision, some dreams, hopes, and even objectives. But we don't call them plans. We call them strong intentions to continue to respond to needs we are seeing.

Yes, it is scary, and it makes us feel a bit uncomfortable when people ask “so what's the long term plan for Knowmads?”. We admit with honesty and humility that we simply don't know. There is too much uncertainty around us to plan the future.

We practice accepting that things are going to change, that nothing will ever stay the same. That some projects will die, that some opportunities will emerge, and that most of it is out of our control and will certainly go against our personal agendas.

However, it does not mean we get to be passive. We constantly need to strengthen our capacity to respond to change and to live in uncertainty. And most important, we constantly need to strengthen our capacity to listen: Listening to the world, paying attention to what we see and hear around us. Listening to each others, and constantly

learning from each others. Listening to ourselves, and to the change happening inside each individuals and inside the organization as a whole.

Overall, it is really about seeing our organization as a living system. We did give birth to it, but it is now following its own path, while we are just hosting the process. We are only staying true to the practices that allow effective collaboration to emerge, and that leave space for the organization to evolve the way it needs.

Conclusion

Our conviction is that being engaged and happy at work does not have to be only for the lucky ones that create their own organizations, follow their passions, or work on social projects.

It can happen in any organization, but it does require a strong intention from the people within, a fair amount of courage to step-in and voice it, and a lot of practice.

It means actively paying attention to the energy inside the team and inside the organization, and constantly having it as #1 priority.

It also means stepping-in and initiating the difficult conversations - How are we doing? Am I happy and fulfilled? What about you? Are we working well together? What are the things that need to be said to all be in peace with each other? What are the things that can be changed for us to thrive individually and collectively?

It also means intentionally bringing people together and creating the opportunity for everyone to ask for support, to offer help, to share appreciation, to reflect on learnings.

It means sometimes inviting everyone else to stop the doing and take a deep breath. Allowing things to slow down, and to bring back some mindfulness and humanity when they get lost in the hectic working life.

Overall, it means creating conditions for good collaboration to emerge - where people can do the work they are here to do in a way that nurtures their relationships with each other, makes them grow as individuals, and brings them a sense of meaning and connection.