Principles – a way of thinking

How to pave the way for creativity and personal initiative in a strictly structured technical environment and a tough and competitive business environment – that's the challenge. To run a global corporation successfully is no democracy, but it can involve creating a working environment that involves every employee and where everybody has a say. Getting there is a lengthy process that cannot be rushed. It's part of the history of the company and a result of step-by-step evolution rather than abrupt change.

One of the foundations has been formulated as three strong core values: customer first, respect for the individual, quality. They apply throughout the company, whatever the activity and whoever the customer is, internal or external.

Another foundation is the establishment of principles. Principles may be perceived as unspoken inhibitors of creativity, but they can be used to achieve quite the opposite. No matter how we see it, principles guide people's way of thinking.

The common principles within our company have gradually become a natural framework – a set of rules – that facilitates creativity rather than inhibiting it. It's like playing tennis: you know what the net and the lines are there for and you know the rules; the rest is up to you.

The values and principles are not just spoken, they are documented, explained and discussed to enable every single employee to adopt them. The normal situation is described in detail and everybody is encouraged to be observant and detect deviations. Writing down the principles also means that they are subject to continuous discussion and open to change.

The leadership principles have also been carefully defined to function as a set of practicable rules:

- Co-ordinate cross-functionally but work independently – take responsibility
- Work with details, understand the context
- Act now – think long-term
- Build know-how through continuous learning
- Stimulate commitment through involvement

It is possible and necessary to define own principles and targets within each operational area, which are followed-up using commonly defined key performance indicators. Every single employee thus forms part of the never-ending improvement work.

Inspired by talks with Toyota, the implementation began some 15 years ago and has ever since been progressing in small steps. Taking the full leap at once would have been impossible. What's more, nobody could have foreseen exactly where we were going, just as we cannot say precisely where we will be 15 years from now.