

## Interview Kiki Stiemer on TrustTalk podcast on “Unsolicited Advice and Trust”

**IntroVoice:** Welcome to TrustTalk. We will take you on a grand tour around TrustTalk. It is trust that defines daily life, politics, media, technology, management, law, economics and all aspects of society. Trust is everywhere and is always around you. But trust takes years to build, seconds to break and forever to repair. Enjoy this new episode of TrustTalk. Your host today, Severin de Wit.

**Interviewer:** Good morning, Kiki, welcome at TrustTalk podcast, you have worked for 24 years at Ahold, which is now AholdDelhaize, fulfilling several SVP roles in logistics, e-commerce, strategy and intelligence and global sourcing. You worked throughout Europe and the US and four years ago you started to work as an independent consultant in organization development. As the focus of this interview will be on trust. What role do you find of trust in your work as an external consultant?

**Kiki Stiemer:** Well, I think that trust is it. It's key. It's where it starts and it's also how effective you can be in advising and in helping organizations. And trust, it's interesting, we will talk about it more, so trust has to do with integrity. It is about if you trust the person to deal with your confidential information, for example. A lot of the senior leaders are quite lonely and they want to share their thoughts and their feelings about the organization. So how do you deal with that, has a lot to do with trust, but it's also trust about if your experience and your knowledge is applicable to your organization. Do you believe that that person can really help you? And do you trust that that person is really working to do the best for you, instead of for the person, you know? So how about the ego of the consultant? So I think that's very important about trust for a consultant.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, you did an executive master. I was called Consulting and Coaching for Change at INSEAD in France, the famous management school in Fontainebleau. To conclude the Master you wrote a thesis and the title of the thesis is "An Exploratory Perspective on Effective Unsolicited Advice". In that thesis, you asked the question, what happens when employees come to their bosses with advice they have not asked for, or, as you call it in your thesis, unsolicited advice? What triggered your choice to focus on this subject?

**Kiki Stiemer:** Yeah, well, experience. So I saw a lot of people walking around in companies having the feeling that they had thoughts and advices for their bosses and that was not acted upon. And later they always said, Oh, I told you so. And, uh, you know, uh, why was it not working? So that was the main trigger, because I think it's very important for organizations that they start that they really appreciate the advice of their employees. But in one way or the other, it's not always landing well. So for me, it was the experience of having a lot of these kind of situations that triggered this thesis.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. You researched the process that takes place once the unsolicited advice is given in an employment situation. So what happens when a senior leader mostly, I think they were mostly CEOs and board members, receive advice from a subordinate, an advice that was not asked for? So what were your major findings in your research?

**Kiki Stierner:** Well, the major finding is that, uh, when I started to interviews with these people, they almost all started by saying I'm quite good in taking in unsolicited advice. But when you started to talk about specific examples, it turned out that it was very difficult for a leader to take an unsolicited advice because they often dismiss it or they say the person did not understand the complete context or where I have to deal with. So that was very easy for CEOs to just discard it. And so what one of the main findings was that during the conversation, a lot of the CEOs got their own insight, how they were dealing with unsolicited advice and often and unsolicited advice is a surprise for them.

**Interviewer:** One of the publications you will rely on is the book *The Trusted Advisor*, a famous book by Maister, Green, and Galford and they focus on three basic skills for an advisor, earning trust, giving advice effectively and building relationships. How do you see these three elements? How do they interact with the focus on trust?

**Kiki Stierner:** Yeah, my opinion is that it all starts with building relations, because that's where the trust is built and that's also where you can give active, uh, effective advice and building relations, that sound very theoretical, but building relations is has a lot to do with communication, in my opinion. So, um, so are you able to really get into the mind of the person you advising or whatever relation you have, but in the mind and also use the words that they will use that they understand you, you know, and that's the start of a relationship. They also say that in private relations that communication is key, but that's also in work relations. So for me, it is it starts with building relations and with consultancy, it's easier because you're asked for advice. But if you are working in a company and you want to start to share advice, you have to build a relationship of trust. And trust, again, means that the person who is receiving the advice believes that you do this, you give this advice in good interest of the person that is receiving it,

**Interviewer:** and especially if you are a subordinate and the lower you are in the management chain, the more difficult, I guess, it is to give advice, which is unsolicited. They didn't ask you to.

**Kiki Stierner:** because it's often perceived as negative. So you hardly sometimes you give advice like, oh, maybe you should go to this market or I have a great new product. You know, that's positive advice. But often it is about you should not hire him or you should do something about that or we should not go to France or we should, you know, so it's all sort of negative, so then it becomes even more difficult. And if

the person that is receiving the advice, uh, thinks that there is an interest at your side to give this advice, so the interest is not the company or the person who's receiving it, then it goes wrong.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I remember - it's a little bit off script- but I remember reading the book from Maister that self-orientation is also important. So you're more self-orientation-centered the advisor is, the less likely that trust relationship will be for the receiving party, do agree with that?

**Kiki Stierner:** Absolutely. So the ego of the person. So if I'm, I have a big ego and I advise you, you will be less likely that you will take my advice. And it's very interesting if you start to talk about that with the leaders, because that's all what we call under the surface, this happening, because it's sometimes it's captured in the work, do they like the person, yeah, because it has to do with do I believe that what you are saying is selfless?

**Interviewer:** Yeah, it's not said because I have a vested interest in saying that.

**Kiki Stierner:** exactly

**Interviewer:** because I want to make money or I want to have that assignment or whatever.

**Kiki Stierner:** Yeah, but also smaller things. So suppose I advise you something and I walk away and I tell everybody that I advised you that, it's also very tricky, because it's an advice, it's not an order. Yeah. So it's a suggestion to you. You have to deal with it. I have to walk away and shut up. If I don't, it all has an effect on how much you trust me in advice.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. Coming back to the book of Maister, Green and Galford, they use it that, meanwhile, I guess it's a famous formula to describe the four primary components of trust. Trust equals C+R+I where the "C" stands for credibility, "R" stands for reliability, and the "I" for intimacy all over the denominator "S", which is what we just talked about, self-orientation. Can you explain the elements and how they relate to unsolicited advice and give us some examples of those four factors.

**Kiki Stierner:** So, how it relates, I mean, I already gave some examples about reliability, that has a lot to do with how trust, how you deal with the fact that you given the advice, but credibility, that's also a very interesting thing, because often it's looked at if people have experience about something. So if you get advice from somebody who's very knowledgeable in data management and he gives an advice on data management, you are more likely to listen to that person than if the HR person is giving you information on data management. So it has a lot of experience, but it's not only that, it's also if the person has a good

understanding of the context in which data management is working in your company or for you. So if he's working in a very different company, I experienced it myself, too. I'm coming from a corporate world. If I advising our family companies, they also have something like, OK, does he have the relevant knowledge? I have a lot of experience, but is it relevant for my company? So that's all happening at the moment that people give, get and receive an advice that's all playing in their minds, it's credibility,

**Interviewer:** like if it is unsolicited advice and there is no credibility, you unconsciously will probably derange, say, OK, it's irrelevant

**Kiki Stierner:** because their first reaction is dismissing the advice. There are hardly any people that immediately say: I will take it in because the person has thought about certain things already, they are of the opinion that I have thought about all the components of it. Then somebody walks in and comes with the advice on a subject in that total. Yet so the first reaction of people is: dismiss it. That's the easiest part, because else you have to start to act upon it.

**Interviewer:** Having been an attorney myself most of my life, I find especially the intimacy part difficult. My feel is that most advisers like to be, as Maister describes it, more aloof, keeping a certain emotional distance. Yeah, it's all about content. If we are lawyers, we think we are credible because we know about the content and the intimacy parts, hmm, scary, right? And they, the authors of the book, describe the lack of intimacy as the "most common failure in building trust". How do you think showing intimacy can contribute to trust in an advisory recipient relationship?

**Kiki Stierner:** Now, I recognize very much that intimacy is one of the most difficult parts, but intimacy for me means that you stay on an equal level with the one you are advising. And that means also that you have to share also your doubts and your vulnerability in certain areas. And if you keep an emotional distance, you talk too much from the head, a need to start to talk from the heart and the heart means that you need to again understand the context the person is in, you need to understand the difficulty it is to maybe act upon the advice, because that all helps to be receptive of the advice. Many leaders have the intent, I have the idea that if they get advice that they do start to act upon it and if they don't immediately know how to do that, they will dismiss it.

**Interviewer:** because they are there in the job of making decisions.

**Kiki Stierner:** exactly.

**Kiki Stierner:** So if I advice you something, they feel that they immediately have to answer to me if they agree or disagree. If they agree, they need to know what to do with it. That's difficult. So it's far more easy to dismiss it. Yea, so if I start to say and give a space for them to be in doubt on how to deal with it, I give the opportunity for them to think about it but not act upon it, the chances are bigger that my advice will be taken.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. For your research, you did qualitative interviews for your research and you did that with CEOs, Dutch CEOs and board members from Dutch companies. And you describe in your thesis how you practice specific techniques of conducting interviews. That's something I could learn about, by the way, because I heard the word hermeneutics as a way to interpret biblical or literary text, I thought it was, but I guess that's not what you meant. Right. O. Can you describe how you conducted the interviews and why that is so important?

**Kiki Stierner:** Um, well, you can talk about this topic very theoretical and so like trust also. And you can also talk about unsolicited advice. Like I just said, everybody in the beginning, not everybody, but almost everybody in the beginning of the interview said I'm pretty good in taking unsolicited advice. But if you take the approach that I've taken and you let them talk about examples and more specifically about how they felt in these situations and how they interpreted their feeling, why they felt the way they felt, then you get to a very different level of understanding of what's happening at the moment of unsolicited advice. Because then they come, they can hardly give any good examples of unsolicited advice, so they start to explain examples about where they dismissed the unsolicited advice and if you go to these examples, you get the real reasons why it's so difficult for them to take that in.

**Interviewer:** I read in your thesis the words "confirmation bias"

**Kiki Stierner:** Yeah, that means that they, everybody has that, I mean, you have, as soon as you see somebody or somebody starts to talk, you immediately have a perception of the reliability of that person or you have an image of that person and whatever he says, in the first instance, you try to confirm what you already think. It's very difficult to change your mind in that during listening. You know, so that's, that kind of thing is happening. And you need to be, as the advisor, be aware of how you're being seen.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. And you also mentioned the importance, I think you even developed a model for that, the importance of emotional intelligence.

**Kiki Stierner:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Can you explain a little bit?

**Kiki Stierner:** Emotional intelligence on both sides? So it's actually a nice bridge with what I just try to say is that if I walk in with advice, I need to be aware of how you perceive me. And if I know that you don't really like me, and that could be, then the question is; what time do I choose to talk to you about it? Maybe I should take somebody else in. You know, maybe I should first explain why I come with this advice, you know, because I have something to overcome. Your bias towards me is this and visa versa. If you are the recipient, you need to be aware of I don't like this person, so I will have the tendency to dismiss what he is going to say. I think he said he's quite arrogant or he is annoying, you know, because he always walks in with critical remarks. You know, you need to be aware of that yourself. That's emotional intelligence. You need to almost step out of yourself, look at yourself, know what's going on in the relation.

**Interviewer:** So what is that EUA model that you developed in your thesis, the effectiveness model for unsolicited advice?

**Kiki Stierner:** So what I try to do is, based on all these interviews, I come up with what are in this case, seven elements which are critical if you want to make an advice successful. And there are a couple of elements that has to do with how the recipient sees the advisor, and that has to do with credibility and it has to do with likability. But it also has to do with the recipient towards the adviser, oh sorry, the advisor towards the recipient. And also about the message itself. Is the topic we are talking about relevant at that moment? You know, if somebody is in a middle of a big crisis and you come with the color of the canteen, you know, it's not really relevant at the moment. Is the timing right. A lot of people give advice at coffee machines or while a guy is just walking around the office, but you don't know where he mentally is. So there are seven components in which I believe they all need to be on a certain level to make an advice effective. And if one doesn't work so you don't like me and that's overpowering everything, you will not take in what I'm saying, if the timing is off, you know, I can have the best advice, but it's not working. So that's what's the model is about, that these three components, you, me and the topic, are important in that.

**Interviewer:** So you do encounter trust yourself as a consultant, as an important element in your work?

**Kiki Stierner:** Yeah, very much. I think that's a and that's, that's key. I started with that. But as a consultant it's a little bit easier because it's not unsolicited. I mean, they ask are you being asked for it. Yeah but what they only ask you if they trust you. Or you have to come up with a very technical expertise like you need to implement an IT system or whatever, but in my case where it's about organizational development,

where it's about coaching, where it's about bringing the organization to a high level, it has very much to do with if they trust me as a person.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, well, I think we covered most of the elements importance and especially the one on trust. I think you very much for this insightful interview. And I hope that our listeners will be inspired by your ideas about unsolicited advice. Thank you very much.

**Kiki Stierner:** Thank you.

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