



SPECIAL AWARD WINNER

DELA - Caring
in Coronatimes



INTERVIEW WITH DELA

BEST WORKPLACE, ALSO IN CORONATIMES

Even in Covid times, Best Workplaces™ 2021 managed to be great employers! They created a culture of trust and continued to seek connection with their employees. They turned the crisis into an opportunity, an opportunity to let their employees shout even louder from the rooftops how proud they are of their organisation.

We interviewed our special award winner for Caring in Corona-times, DELA! Ludo Verstraete - HR Manager - explain how they cared for their employees this past year.



CARE IS A CONCEPT THAT IS A PART OF OUR DNA. IT APPEARS IN OUR PURPOSE AND OUR MISSION.



DELA

WHAT WAS YOUR STRATEGY REGARDING THE THEME 'CARING' AND HOW DID THIS APPROACH HELP YOU WHEN DEALING WITH THE CORONA-CRISIS?

For us, 2020 in itself was a special year. That was the case for everyone off course, due to Corona, but for us it also meant working on a new business plan 2025. That was pretty intense.

Care is a concept that is part of our DNA. It appears in our purpose and our mission. It is even in our acronym, because DELA stands for 'carry each other's burdens' (In Dutch: 'Draag elkanders lasten'). Dela was founded in 1937 by Dutch workers who observed in their environment that, if you didn't have a good home, if you weren't rich, and you died, then there was a risk that you wouldn't have a dignified funeral. They decided they did not want that and wanted to make sure, 'if one of us dies, we will take care of each other and make sure there is a



DELA
in a nutshell

820 employees work for DELA, a funeral specialist that makes sure funerals are arranged but also takes care of insurances

DELA stands for 'Draag Elkanders Lasten' (in Dutch)

DELA is a cooperative organisation with a mission to help people to say goodbye in a dignified way



www.dela.be

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proper memorial.' So DELA started from a cooperative idea, out of solidarity, we want to take care of each other. Following that past, and in our business plan for 2025 we go back to these roots, to that philosophy.

When we, as DELA, ask ourselves what we want to bring to the society it is about caring for others. We strive to make things attainable for people who could not reach it on their own. Starting from the strength of the group, we consider it our social responsibility to do what is necessary to provide the necessary care.

Quickly, after Corona started in Belgium, we had to started conveying the concept of care to all levels in the organisations: there were people who tested positive, we had to organise funerals for people who died of Corona,... In the beginning, you could feel that there was a lot fear. We had to ensure that even though our own employees were worried, they were able to provide caring support for the families of the deceased. That was really not easy. We experienced terribly sad situations, following Corona, and we did not only have

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to take care of our own employees, who were afraid, but also of the families who had suffered this terrible loss.

We focused on leadership. Even though, a manager could not always be there physically, they had to learn how to give attention and look for connection from a distance. We organised sessions on how to do that, for instance how can you react when people are afraid,...

The strength of our organisation is that we have always been a very people-oriented organisation, where care is part of our DNA. It made it a lot easier for us to do the right things, both for our own people and for our families.

WHAT INITIATIVES DID YOU SET UP TO MAKE SURE EMPLOYEES FELT THAT CARE EVEN STRONGER IN CORONATIMES?

Like many organisations, we had to change gear very quickly. We set up a **CMT, a crisis management team**. That was a part of the management team that sat together virtually every week to think about: what is going on here, what should we do?

For us, logistics were very important, because our people immediately had to be given the necessary equipment to be able to give a proper burial to the deceased, including people who had died of corona. Knowing that the virus remains on the body of a deceased person for a while, you know that this is a strong risk. We tapped into all our channels and networks to get not only mouth masks very quickly, but also whole suits so that we could do our work properly.

Regarding the human and emotional aspect, employees received support from an external organisation called Pobos psychologists. Off course, managers could do the same and were able to ask their questions,

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How DELA made sure employees know they care

1. A clear focus on care as a part of the DNA of DELA
2. Leadership was key, which means managers were given extra support to be able to care for their teams
3. A crisis management team was set up to give people direction and energy
4. Employees were provided with psychological support via an external organisation to talk about their worries
5. Communication received extra attention and working groups were set up to keep employees in the loop and to discuss post-Corona times. This way employees were given a reassuring perspective for the future

talk about their worries. This is still the case today. We have invested a great deal in this and to this day there are teams and individual employees who continue to go to Pobos. They need it and they are really happy that they are heard and content with the interaction. It does something for them.

We also did a lot of communication. **In critical situations, it is essential to be able to offer a vision on the future.** Even if you can't see the light at the end of the tunnel yet, it's good to do things that make people feel that they have perspective. Around May-June, we set up a working group consisting of employees from all departments of our organisation thinking about post-corona work. With that, **we invited people to look to the future and that gave energy.** We realised that the way we had organised ourselves until then would change, also post-corona. We had monthly meetings with that group. Suggestions that came out of those exercises were taken up in our master plan 2025, such as a new home working policy, ideas regarding communication, leaderships, well-being at work, care for each other.

WHAT WAS THE REACTION OF YOUR EMPLOYEES TO YOUR APPROACH?

From time to time, we sent out surveys to monitor how they were feeling, their well-being. Coincidentally, our Management Assistant, was studying at the VUB and doing a thesis on the impact of stressful situations on people working in the funeral industry. With corona, she was able to use that research, supported by a scientific tool, to gauge how our employees felt in the midst of corona during the performance of their work.

Again, that gave people energy because **they know: we receive attention, we are questioned, and, especially afterwards, they also feel what we do with it.** As an organisation, you have to think carefully and know: how are our people doing? And then do what is necessary to ensure that these people can do their jobs comfortably and with the necessary resources, even in this critical phase.

One of the conclusions we reached at the outset was that we have two sectors: funeral services and insurance. In the case of funeral work, you can hardly take that work home with you. Those people had to continue working at the funeral home. At the same time, our insurance and holding company staff continued to work at home. Here, we saw an area of tension among our employees. In the beginning, the people from the funeral home who had to go to work, who were in the firing line looked at their colleagues from insurance and holding company thinking 'you are lucky, because you can work at home'.

Now, a year on, a lot of people who still work at home today are more than tired of it. We are desperate to be able to go back to work for once. In the meantime, our colleagues from funeral services have also realised this. Now we are in the reverse situation, the people who work from home yearn to go back to that workplace.

Those emotions are allowed to be there. As management, you have to identify, understand, speak, listen and explain: 'this is the reality, this is how it is now, but we are going to manage it in a good way and we are going to do everything we can so that you can do your



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job in a good way in your situation'. That's what we did, by talking to each other a lot.

Our CEO has taken a lot of initiatives to bring people together via video conferences, via certain fun themes, to listen to each other, but also to do fun things with each other... For example, the entire insurance department made songs and films to express their appreciation for their colleagues at funerals. That was beautiful, a mosaic of videos of appreciation, that was really moving. Through initiatives like these, we brought our culture, our warm family culture to the forefront.

That is also something we very consciously focused on in our communication. From the moment it is safe again and we can get back together as a family, then we will immediately switch back to that and look for the best way forward in the future.

IN YOUR SECTOR SPECIFICALLY, NOT ONLY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO CARE FOR YOUR EMPLOYEES BUT ALSO FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS, THE FAMILIES, HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH THAT?

That care was indeed double: for our own employees as well as for our customers, and with funerals we tend to talk about our families.

Following the regulations set by the government, the way a funeral was organised was heavily impacted. **I can only take my hat off for my colleagues who, always, take on so many different roles: they are organisers, psychologists, priests, they are sometimes moderators, they are sometimes referees,...** We dealt with the situation very understandingly and the same time, we had to make sure that the families stuck to the rules. At a very emotional moment, we also had to have the courage to say to a family: keep your distance, wear your mask, ...

Again, we monitored this, and we know that the families appreciated the way we have dealt with the situation, also in those periods. **We have not compromised on quality. It has been different, but we have certainly not compromised our empathy, our care for our families. It was different, but not less.** That care for the families, that is what makes our employees really proud.



We participate in Great Place to Work and the dimension pride always scores very high with us. When you work in the funeral industry, it is almost a calling to do that kind of work. Not everyone can do that, but those who can get a lot of satisfaction from being able to do everything they can for a family. Because it is the last thing we can do.

IN WHAT WAY HAVE YOUR CORPORATE VALUES PLAYED A ROLE IN THIS APPROACH?

Absolutely, but of course they play an important role, not only this year. I have worked in various organisations and very many of them work with a mission, a vision and values. When you enter the reception of a company, this is often also nicely displayed on the wall. We don't display it, but I can guarantee you that this is simply part of the way we do our work every day. Not especially in a corona year. **It is always important to us: to be involved, honest, entrepreneurial. These are concepts that are in our fibres, in our genes, in our DNA, they are simply interwoven. They tell you about the way we want to do our work.**

This is also expressed to the families, especially in coronation times. We have thought about that. 'How can you ensure, in times of crisis, that the family is satisfied in an involved, honest and enterprising manner?'. **These values have helped us to think about entrepreneurship in times of crisis.** We knew we could not

do funerals like we used to, so what can we do? One good example was an initiative from a funeral director. He came to us and thought: 'the family can't say goodbye, the neighbours can't say goodbye, ... What can we do?' His idea was to drive to the house where the deceased used to live and put a rose on the front door. We made sure that the neighbours and families were aware and at a safe distance, they could all follow that. This was filmed, I saw the footage, it was fantastic. The feeling among those people was immense. It was really something that created a connection from a distance. That is entrepreneurship.

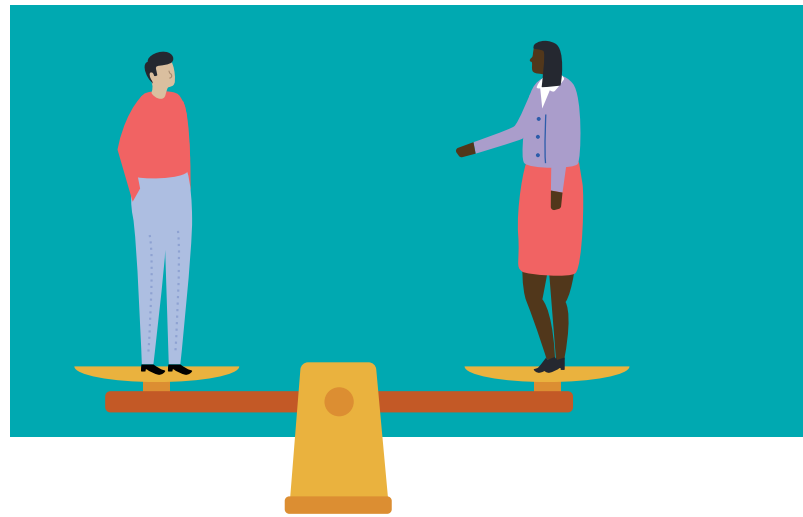
Nobody said we had to do things like that, but we wanted to do something anyway. **We were really limited by the measures, but things like that come from our values: from a commitment to the families, taking initiatives to do things in an entrepreneurial way and in the right way. We ensured that the families felt that they were getting special attention.**

These are things that we can do precisely because we have this culture based on our three values. Again, it is not something that hangs on the walls, it's simply within us. When we recruit, we also check to what extent people consider those values important. And if they don't, we won't recruit them. We are looking for just that kind of people, with that kind of DNA.

WHAT HAS THIS PAST YEAR TAUGHT YOU FOR THE FUTURE?

2020 was not only a corona year for us, it was also a year to think about a new master plan 2025. Indeed, at the same time, we looked at what happened in 2020. We defined several things in terms of policy, partly based on the experiences of 2020.

We were positively surprised that resilience is very much present in our organisation. We saw that we reacted very resiliently. Moreover, we realised, as an organisation, we are going to encounter these kinds of things in the future so let us formulate the general objective (1 of the 6) in a new master plan: we want to strive for involved, vital and proud employees. That means that we are going to focus on people, on their development, on their growth in resilience, in agility, we want to recruit people who embrace change, who are not afraid of change, ...



What we experienced in 2020 will have an impact on several processes that we are now going to do from an HR perspective. For example, this major objective of involved, vital and proud employees will lead us to focus on employee development, where they themselves take control and look at things through self-reflection and 360-degree feedback: what am I good at, where can I still make progress and where will I take the initiative to grow. That is one example. The second example is leadership. We really do want to focus on renewed leadership, partly nourished by the experience of 2020 because we see that managers sometimes find it difficult to create that connection with their people from a distance. We want to continue in a people-oriented and result-oriented way. We are thinking about a new form of leadership. The 3rd example is our wellbeing policy. This, considering all the elements I have mentioned such as homework.

These are three examples of projects that we are starting to ensure that what we have learned in 2020 will make sure that we have agile, resilient people, who are curious, who are eager to develop themselves, who once again embrace change.

Do you also want to follow in the footsteps of DELA?! Be sure to go to www.greatplacetowork.be to find out more about our way of working and the ways we can support you in your journey towards an even better workplace!

