

No bosses, low stress levels and good business. How did Vertia manage the transformation from a family-like small company into a self-organising culture?

Maria Lehto, [Amara Collaboration](#) 2021

In the last three years, Vertia's turnover has doubled, and the company has gone through a significant transformation towards a more self-organising way of operating. Although self-organising has been at the core of Vertia's operations since the founding days, the founder and CEO Topi Jokinen was convinced that it could still be taken to the next level. As the company grew, the familiar ways of organising were not suitable anymore and new ways of self-organising had to be found. Simultaneously, as the recent study by Tampere University shows, stress levels in Vertia are significantly lower than in the majority of the other companies researched. There are no bosses, employees report good results in the Pulssi wellbeing questionnaire and business is booming. What has changed during the past few years for this to be possible?

The CEO Topi Jokinen points out that while the new way of operating has been working well, the journey to where the company is today has had its challenges. "This is a continuous journey, and much is still to be learned", he says. This case sheds light on what was the situation in Vertia in 2018 when Topi returned as a CEO, what changes were made for this kind of transformation to be possible and how has the company evolved since then. Different perspectives are provided by Vertia's CEO and founder Topi Jokinen, his developmental coach and Chair of Vertia's advisory board Heidi Gutekunst as well as a long-time employee, who has had the opportunity to see and experience Vertia's transformation firsthand.

Topi Jokinen, CEO of Vertia



Apart from his CEO role in Vertia, Topi is a father and composer. He is one of the founders and has been leading the company from the beginning. In 2015 he stepped out to venture in the start-up world and few years later acted as one of the founding members of the Teal Finland -community. Facilitating the change in workplaces toward a more self-organising and human centred culture has been a big motivator for him for years. In 2018 Topi returned to Vertia and started a new chapter as a CEO. At the time, he attended an [Action Inquiry and GLP workshop](#) with Amara Collaboration and started developmental coaching, which has had a significant role in his own and in the company's development.

Heidi Gutekunst, CEO of Amara Collaboration

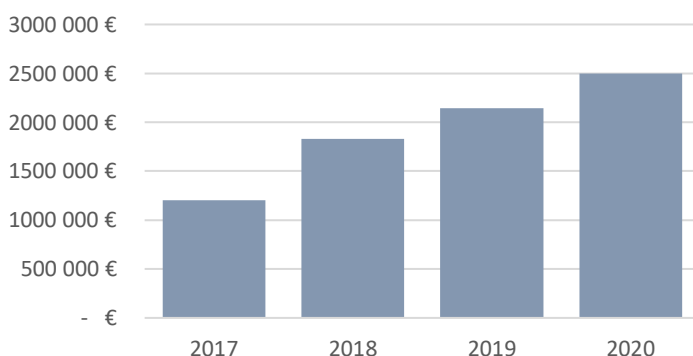


Heidi Gutekunst (M.Sc. Econ.) is a founder and CEO of Amara Collaboration and a regular speaker at Business Forums interested in her personal transforming ability. Heidi has been Chair of Vertia's advisory board since March 2019 and has had an opportunity to follow the company's transformation nearby. She has also worked in close collaboration with Vertia's CEO Topi Jokinen in the form of developmental coaching, offering support and alternative perspectives.

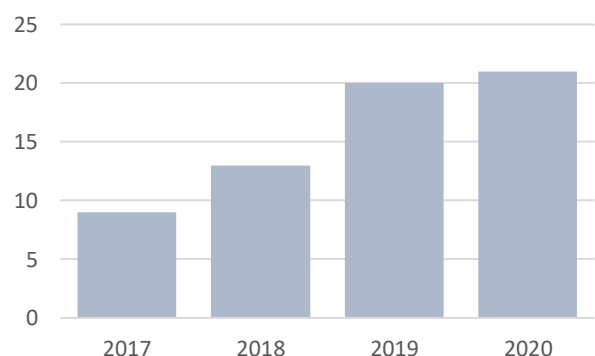


Vertia is a Finnish company founded in 2011, operating in the area of construction and currently employing 21 people. Vertia's mission is to help people live in better homes, through offering quality measurements and diagnostics in the construction sites.

Revenue



Employees



The starting point

In the beginning of 2018, Topi had just returned as CEO to Vertia and was assessing the situation in the company. During Topi's years away, the company had grown in revenue and in headcount, but while it had pushed for more sales and efficiency, other aspects had been left with too little attention. "Everyone was working hard, and the business was very profitable at that point", Topi recalls, "But it was clear that if we wanted to go forward from that point, to rise to the next level, plenty of work was to be done".

He explains that the ways of working and the systems in place had not been developed, although on paper the company had grown. "Vertical development in the organisation had not taken place", he comments and continues that apart from the information systems and processes that needed to be developed to suit the growing business, the human aspect of the work needed attention as well. "Until then we had been like a family, around ten people, everyone knew each other, and we had a good vibe and fun at work. It was a great phase but when the company grew, this structure started to crack. We had become too big to operate as a family and we had to find new ways to do things", Topi comments.

**“It was clear that if we wanted to rise to the next level,
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At first, inspired by the Teal culture and his time in the start-up world, Topi started to develop the company and the operations with great energy and rigor. Quite soon he noticed however, that the speed was too great and people in the company struggled to stay aboard. "Everything was changing all the time, systems and processes were changing, we were building a new team structure... all of this caused some resistance", Topi explains. He recalls being convinced and determined about the new team structure and was bringing it in to the company by force, until he had to admit that it simply didn't work. "Of course, it vexed me a bit and the team development received less attention" he says and continues: "But then I shifted my attention to other things, since there was so much to be developed anyway".

Even though some level of self-organising has been in place in Vertia from the beginning, during the earlier years, the top management had taken care of the major decisions. The boost in development from 2018 onwards was clearly a step to the next level and brought even more freedom and responsibility to the employees. One of the long-time employees comments that in the beginning of Topi's second time as a CEO, the responsibility of how exactly to move towards a more self-organising structure seemed to be much more on the employees' shoulders. Several new employees had just been hired, nearly doubling the headcount and this fast growth recalled for new structures and new ways of self-organising. "There was a lot of testing and experimenting on how to organize the so called 'cells' and what worked and what didn't. There was also plenty of training, not only about measurements and other substance matters but also about the human and personal aspects", the employee explains. She continues that even though the changes caused some turbulence at the time, the increased attention on development was needed and welcome, because "Just executing the work narrow-mindedly day in day out is simply not sustainable".

What is self-organising and how to get there?

Defining self-organising is not an easy task, as even Topi admits. "I'm not quite sure what it means actually", he says and continues that "in Vertia it is constant learning and development". According to Topi, it can look very different depending on the context and the same model will not work for everyone. He explains that self-organising is challenging and requires a continuous search for a balance. For himself he finds it interesting to search for the right balance on when to intervene and when to give space to the employees.

In the #loistatyössäsi -podcast by Wise Consulting, Topi and the hosts took their turn in aiming to define what does self-organising actually mean. One of the biggest misconceptions they wish to correct is that it doesn't simply mean not having bosses. Instead, it is based on trust and humanity. Topi also points out that self-organising doesn't mean letting everyone do what they want, since the aim is still to work as one unified organisation. According to Topi, the need for leadership does not disappear: instead of management, true leadership is needed. A leader's role in a more traditional organisation is very different, compared to a self-organising one. "A traditional leader tends to know all the answers, but that does not work in self-organising", Topi says. He emphasises the need for dialogue and the process of examining and exploring different assumptions. Based on that, a fruitful conversation can be maintained instead of arguing who is right and whose assumption is the best.

Topi also emphasises that for self-organising to work, the top management and other key stakeholders must be aligned and committed to it. "It requires tremendous trust and courage from the leaders" he explains and points out that there are several not-so-successful examples of organisations trying to implement self-organising culture without the leaders being ready and committed to it. Topi highlights that the challenge is to reach a state where the shared goals, vision and purpose direct the actions more than selfish ones. "The leader's own attitude and readiness determines a lot here, otherwise selfishness, for example the greed for money, can be reflected onto the employees", he says.

While self-organising demands for new kind of leadership, it requires a lot from the employees as well. Topi elaborates this by saying that: "In a hierarchical organisation it might be comfortable to have someone tell you what to do. There's no need to think on your own, but self-organising requires more energy and courage. One must ask for help and search solutions for problems". He also stresses the need for constant practise to find the right balance and draw the lines on what is allowed and what is not. Topi explains that in Vertia, they have started to use the word co-organising instead, because the whole point is to work autonomously but well aligned with others. One way to ensure the alignment in Vertia is a decision-making process that allows anyone to make decisions on the company's behalf, as long as they ask advice and opinions from their co-workers. "In Vertia an individual employee can make decisions, but not in a vacuum", Topi sums up.

How does self-organising affect the employees' well-being?

According to the TEOT research project by Tampere University in 2020, self-organising environments often lead to increased engagement and well-being at work. As noted by Riitta-Liisa Larjovuori, TEOT project researcher and project manager, these positive effects are due to the employees' experiences of being able to influence the company's operations and feeling that others trust one's expertise. She emphasizes that in self-organising organisations the point is not only to involve employees in decision making, but actually support the employees to make the decisions and develop the organisation autonomously. Topi has noticed the positive effects on the employees' wellbeing. "The environment feels safe, and people feel comfortable when there are no hierarchal structures between the co-workers", he explains in an [interview by YLE in November 2020](#).

However, despite its many positive qualities, self-organising is not a magic pill and can affect well-being negatively as well. In the interview by YLE in November 2020, Topi assures that not having bosses has not led to the employees being lazy or not taking care of their work. "Actually, we have experienced the opposite", he explains. "We've had some issues with people working too much. We have to help people to know their own limits so that they don't take too much work upon themselves and know how to recover as well." One of Vertia's employees also comments that the broadened responsibility and expectation for being active in continuously developing the company can be energy consuming. Aligned with the experiences in Vertia, the researchers of the TEOT project note that people who are interested in many different topics can easily commit to too many different roles and the work can become too fractured, leading to loss of the sense of control and achievement. The TEOT project researchers remind that in self-organising cultures it is important to ensure that support, feedback and guidance is available for the employees, for example in the form of mentoring or coaching within the organisation.

What actions were taken in Vertia and what perspective shifts took place?

As Topi let go of pushing the team structure he had in mind and focused his development efforts on other aspects of the company, he soon noticed that things started moving on their own pace. “Six months passed, and the employees raised up a model for the team structure that was much smarter than the one I had initially thought of”, Topi explains. The new team structure is based on cells that are formed around different themes, such as construction measurements or customer service and one person can be part of several cells. “My original idea was to divide the employees to agile type of teams where each team would contain all the skills it needs, but then this...I think more complex model that actually works much better, came from the employees themselves”, Topi says. He emphasizes that the big learning point for him was that if there is an issue that needs to be solved, sometimes not pushing for a set solution might actually be the best thing to do. As the employees have the space to find the solution on their own, they usually do, and often the solution is much better than the one that an individual leader could have come up with.

Topi notes that while Vertia has been self-organising from the beginning, at least on the level of the daily work, the employees were not included in decision making about aspects like sales or strategy. One of the new processes developed in the time after Topi returned as a CEO is a shared decision-making model, through which anyone can make decisions, for example purchases on behalf of the company. Another big change has been increased transparency in salaries and a collaborative salary model, where the employees make the important decisions regarding the salaries together. “There surely has been a lot of changes in a very short time”, Topi admits.

One of Vertia’s long time employees confirms that since Topi came back as a CEO, much more attention has been given to the development of the organisation and the individuals within it. She assures that although development often brings some disorder for a while, it seems to always lead to good things. “Topi offers us authority to develop and brainstorm with other employees. He is involved but doesn’t give ready-made solutions”, she says. “We have a strategy that all employees can influence, and we are developing things together. Topi is open and trusting, but also brings forth his own opinions. Sometimes he gets extravagant ideas that we then tame down if we don’t think they are good for the company, and he listens to us”, the employee explains. She also emphasizes the significant role of trust, enabling open conversation and transparency about salaries, working hours and the company’s financial situation. “This is a big difference compared to the previous CEO. It’s good that Topi wants to develop the company towards more transparent culture”, she says.

Heidi Gutekunst, Topi’s developmental coach and Chair of Vertia’s advisory board comments on the shift by explaining that Vertia is what many call a self-organising organisation and that “it has, in my opinion, entered to become what [Frederic Laloux calls Teal](#) during the past year.” She points out that it seems to be a trend that many companies want to be “self-organising” these days, but few actually do it with the level of maturity that Vertia does. “For a company to operate at this level, the CEO needs to be able to think and act at the rare Transforming action logic stage of development. This will allow the exercise of power in mature and healthy ways, like Topi does”, Heidi notes. “The shift to let go of control and step into uncertainty is often the obstacle for leaders trying to develop self-organising structures”, she says and points out that throughout many people’s career, it is all about controlling people, processes and numbers. “It is easy when everything goes well, but when difficulties appear, most leaders will ‘Pull the hand-break’ in fear of losing control and being responsible for the mistakes of others”.

Heidi emphasises that while developing the organisation, it’s processes and the employees is crucial for organisational transformation to take place, it rarely happens unless the top leaders of the company are committed and invest their own time and effort to the change. When asked about leadership development that has enabled the organisational transformation in Vertia, Topi emphasises the role of individual development as well: “Developing as a leader means developing as a human being”. He explains that the

challenges and experiences he has faced in his life have significantly moulded him as a leader, including depression, therapy, philosophy studies, loss of a family member and becoming a father. He also mentions the role of a well-known Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen for his individual development journey. After taking a moment to think he adds that his development as a leader and Vertia's development as an organisation have gone hand in hand, in a symbiosis. "I might never have grown to be a leader if I hadn't been part of this company," and on the other hand, "Developing the company has required developing myself," he concludes.

"Developing as a leader means developing as a human being"

Heidi also highlights the role of dialogue in transformational leadership and notes that the assumptions and attitudes carried by the leader can have a significant effect on the people they interact with and a systemic impact on the organisation. "I sometimes notice frustration and irritation in leaders, leading to entering conversations with pre-conceived assumption and therefore not even giving conversations a chance to take new turns," she says. Thinking of how much time an average leader spends in meetings and conversations, the assumptions and attitudes one carries when arriving to a meeting can have significant effects on the whole organisation. Heidi emphasises that changing the unhelpful stories we tell ourselves and starting to notice our assumptions requires a lot of work within oneself and one's awareness, but it also opens greater potential in the organisation.

The transformation that has taken place in Topi as a leader has not gone unnoticed within the organisation. One of Vertia's long time employees explains that Topi's leadership has become more systemic, and that he takes notice of his own actions and how those affect the people around him. She also notes that nowadays Topi pays more attention on how and with whom he engages in conversation. "Before Topi was more separate in his own ideology about a self-organising culture. Recently he has come closer to us, listens to us and understands us better than before", the employee observes.

Based on Topi's journey, it seems that to enable true transformation on individual and organisational levels, significant perspective shifts need to take place. To make that happen, true commitment and hard work and discipline from the individual leader is essential. Topi has truly thrown himself to this task and included plenty of reflection, philosophy and reading in his life. He also mentions meditation and freefall writing as important tools that he uses nearly every day, to help structure and analyse things. Topi also notes that being away from the CEO position for few years helped him to take some distance and new perspective. "If you get too stuck on the operative roles, your thinking becomes too narrow", he concludes.

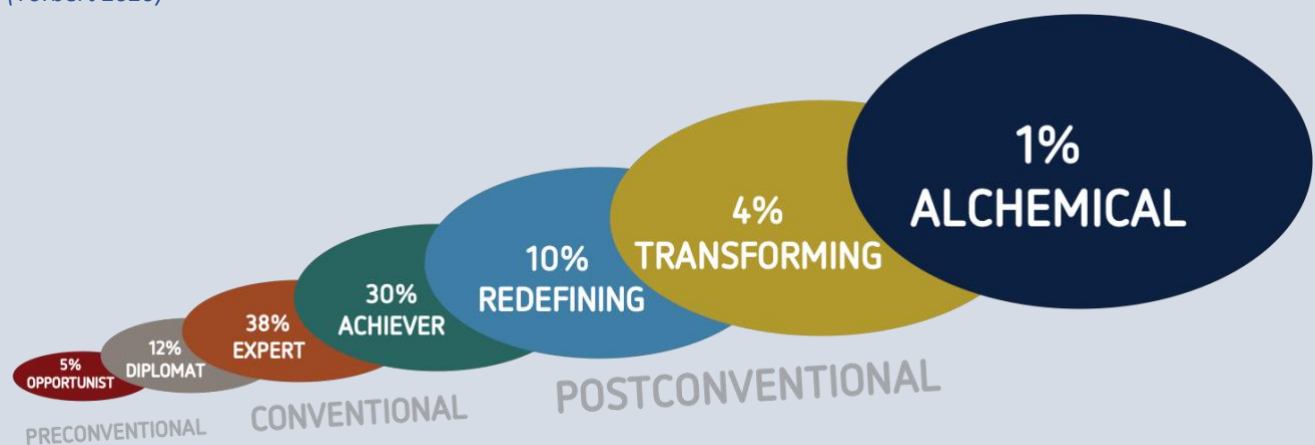
Developing the transforming capacity as a leader surely is hard work, but luckily one does not have to walk the path all alone. One of the ways in which Topi decided to support his development back in 2018 when he got back to Vertia was participating in the [GLP \(Global Leadership Profile\) workshop](#) by Amara Collaboration, offering him knowledge, peer support and practise in developing his transforming leadership capacity. "I felt that it would be very helpful to think about leadership from that perspective", he explains. After the workshop, Topi decided to continue the collaboration with Heidi Gutekunst in the form of developmental coaching. An important part of this development is the discipline of ongoing practice. "We have together thought about what ongoing practices support development on individual, relational and organisational level. The power of the discipline these practices, such as freefall writing or what we call Reflective Journaling in Street Smart Awareness and Inquiry-in-Action by Allen, Gutekunst and Torbert, is well illustrated in this case", says Heidi. Both Topi and Heidi agree that the combination of the GLP and developmental coaching has had a significant effect on Topi's maturing as a leader and the success of the company.

The GLP and developmental coaching as support in leadership development

Heidi offers some insight on the power of developmental coaching, by explaining that in life, most people face difficulties, so called “heat experiences”. She stresses that what matters is how we face and approach these events: “Will they make us smaller through the fear of facing the feelings, or can we be with them and let them offer us opportunities in accelerating development and therefore also leadership effectiveness and capacity to transform?”, she inquires. “In these situations, the relationship with a trusted, mature coach is a significant support”, Heidi continues.

After two and half years of developmental coaching, Topi has noticed significant changes: “In the beginning I got much more irritated. Now that I look at this moment, I don’t have that in the same way. I’ve started to see good in the things that I experienced as annoying before. I’ve surprised myself by not getting irritated if someone disagrees with me and by seeing that they might have a good point.” Topi explains and adds that this shift has had significant effects on how he engages with the people around him. Heidi comments that this illustrates the move from Redefining to Transforming action logic. The shift is to move from an inner reflection in oneself to action outwards with ease of access to other possibilities. She explains that this requires passion and commitment to the learning and taking action in a pragmatic way that is most likely to have impact and be effective, as is characteristic of the Transforming action logic.

The action logics in the GLP and the proportion of leaders representing each (Torbert 2020)



Another big change Topi has noticed as a result of coaching is the newly built courage to let go. With the encouragement from Heidi, he has noticed that doing less can often have much greater impact. “This is something I wouldn’t have dared to do without Heidi”, Topi admits. “I hesitated to make such a radical change but after I’ve let go, I’ve noticed that actually the things I had been doing before were not even necessary or shouldn’t have been done at all. We imagine that many things we do are necessary, but they can even be damaging for the organisation. By taking too much responsibility one might hinder the development or prevent others from taking responsibility, without even noticing that you’re causing it yourself!”

Connected to the above, Topi also notes that at times, procrastination can actually be a very good skill: “I’ve developed a habit of noticing that something needs doing, but not doing it right away. I trust that if it’s important, it will come back to my attention. Often after a while I notice that someone else has taken care of it or that it wasn’t important in the first place.” He explains that just recently he had pushed a time-consuming task forward several times and finally decided to go for a walk before starting to work on it. “While I was walking, I realised that there was a much better solution to the same problem and instead of weeks, it would only take me a day of my time.” Topi notes that the key to these realizations is not to take action by force, but to stop and think for a while. “Before you do anything, go for a walk,” he says. “It’s so simple but how often we actually do it? When you get yourself to a relaxed state, you’re freer to think”.

Heidi points out that what Topi explains above is a good example of how Action Inquiry is effective. “How do we know the difference between ‘what’s important and what’s urgent’, when often, everything is treated as urgent? And how can we stop, think, notice and then act upon the pull, letting it come to us rather than acting like we are chased by the tasks?” she asks. Both ACTION and INQUIRY are important as she points out, because without inquiry, action can go to waste and without action, nothing happens. She notes that Action Inquiry is the underlying approach in developmental coaching, and the only approach statistically confirmed to reliably generate both individual and organisational transformation.

Topi concludes that coaching has helped him to find alternative ways of acting and courage to step away from a well beaten path. He also reminds that since being a leader is not always smooth sailing, having someone to simply be there can be immensely valuable both from a developmental perspective and for dealing with daily operational challenges.

What were the challenges encountered in Vertia's transformation?

Topi explains that as needed as the improvements were, the changes inevitably caused the company to be in an unstable state for a while. "The change had its price", he says and explains that at the time of forming the cells for the new team structure, some employees with similar ways of thinking ended up together and started to drive a culture that was not in line with the overall organisational culture. "When those people connected with each other and confirmed each other's thinking patterns, which were completely different to Vertia's organisational culture overall, a strong conflict had been born", Topi explains. He pondered over the issue and used a lot of energy in trying to solve it in a best possible way, eventually ending up burning out. "Those were tough challenges with the personnel that I was not familiar with", he says and notes that the strong conflict in values was the fundamental reason why some employees ended up leaving the company in the end.

When asked about what made the crisis an enabler for growth instead of a vehicle of destruction, Topi immediately mentions the integrity with values. "I tried to operate in the best possible way, and as much in line with my values as possible", he stresses. Staying true to the values even in difficult times seemed to affect the rest of the company as well, as the majority of the employees felt relief and alignment when the individuals driving different values and ideals had left the company. According to Topi, so much energy was released in the company and the organisational culture, and the shared vision now feels much stronger. "I think that experience made us all grow. People are taking much more responsibility now and somehow, we transformed together to a next level through that crisis", Topi says. He notes that the personnel crisis was a good learning experience for him and many others in the organisation, strengthening the foundations of the company. On a personal level, after having burnt himself out while dealing with the crisis, Topi learned to do little bit less, remain more in the background and take good care of his own recovery and wellbeing.

"The crisis made us all grow. People are taking much more responsibility now and somehow, we transformed together to a next level."

Topi recalls the former CEO agonizing over the feeling that the employees don't want the company to grow and admits having felt similarly at times. "But now they want to grow!", he says delighted. "It's not the management that drags everyone behind. Now it's actually just better to stay out of the way! Now there seems to be a strong spirit of everyone moving to the same direction", he says. Topi seems especially happy about the employees' newly found readiness to take and carry responsibility gives an example of a recent event where the employees made an independent decision of discontinuing a certain employment because the level of performance and culture fit didn't feel right. He seems extremely pleased with the proactiveness of his employees and his own role as an advisor and facilitator, rather than decision maker. "Without the crisis we wouldn't be where we are, not even close!", he states.

One of Vertia's long time employees has recognized some challenges on the way as well, especially in the beginning when they suddenly given much more responsibility than before. "At first it was challenging to figure out how should we operate without managers, especially when there were no clear guidelines", she recalls and says that finding their way to organising the work around the cells took some time. The employee also comments that in the beginning, many took the word "self-organising" too literally and each employee aimed to bring their own vision to the table. She explains that today, they see self-organising as a way of engaging in the issues together. "We have learned to have conversations and to plan

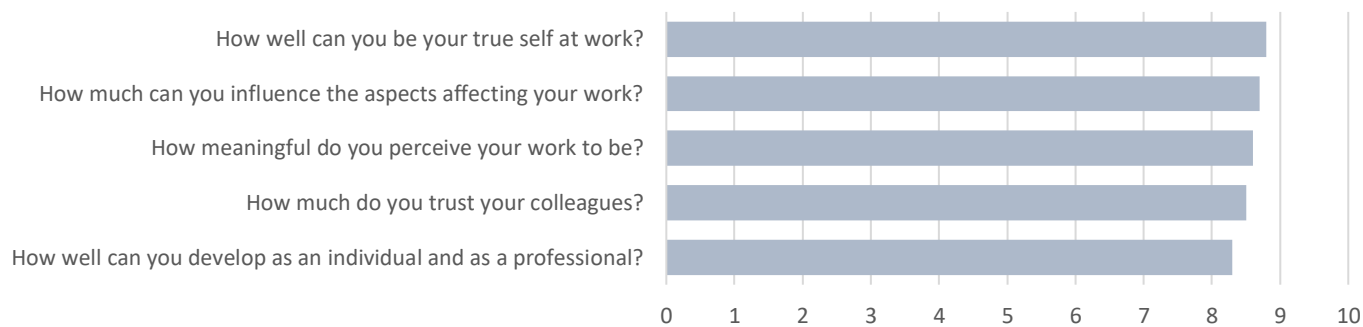
things together. Probably the most important thing that shows in our work every day is that if someone suggests a change, everyone who that change affects, is asked to express their opinion”.

The employee also notes that the self-organising culture might not be a good fit for everyone and people who simply like to execute their work in peace might find it challenging: “It can become really burdensome emotionally to people who just want to push ahead with their own area of responsibility. One must be ready for the change”. She adds that in the more self-organising culture, the employees easily take on too much work. “One must manage the workload autonomously and be aware and sensitive to how much work is enough”, she says and comments that luckily, according to the recent well-being polls, the people seem to get on well.

How is Vertia doing now?

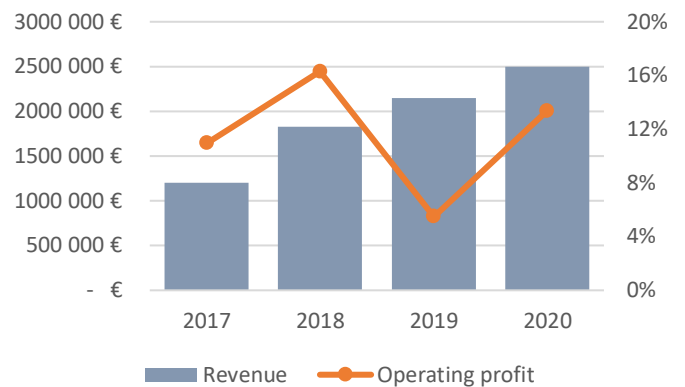
Based on the Pulssi well-being poll and the results of the TEOT research project by Tampere University, Vertia seems to be doing very well. The employees feel that they can be themselves at work, they can truly have influence in the company and they have strong trust between the colleagues. On average, the score on the 1 to 10 scale in the total of 15 questions was 8,1. The TEOT research project results also indicates that Vertia has managed to build a self-organising culture, where the employees feel supported and motivated. In fact, Vertia’s results are higher in almost every area, compared to the other self-organising companies included in the research. The TEOT project researchers emphasize that Vertia’s culture is human centred and communal, and that the well-being of the employees is given a lot of attention. They also note that Vertia clearly stands out with their culture compared to the other organisations in the area of construction.

Selected picks from the employees' well-being poll results (Pulssi)



In the recent years, Vertia has gotten supported by an advisory board founded in 2019. The aim is to get an external soundboard, consisting of three external advisors, Heidi Gutekunst, Timo Luhtaniemi and Aarno Yrjö-Koskinen, together with Vertia’s founders Topi and Heikki Jussila and a Vertia employee. The advisory board brings perspectives, has supported in developing the financial reporting and setting key financial indicators and is in service of both the long term and the short term needs of the company. Two of the advisors, Heidi Gutekunst and Timo Luhtaniemi, have firsthand experience of leading a self-organising company and offering invaluable perspectives. The advisory board is, however, not a decision-making group. “Chairing the advisory board has been rewarding and interesting. It offers perspectives and surfaces internal assumptions and thoughts as well as positive feedback. It is a great honour to chair this board and be part of developing this unique company”, says Heidi.

The company is doing extremely well financially as well, having closed the fiscal year 2020 with 13,35% operating profit. In February 2021, Vertia was informed having been nominated in the Financial Times FT1000 Europe's Fastest Growing Companies -list. Additionally, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) from the customers in 2020 was 82 and that of the employees 67, both being impressive numbers and much above the average in the field.



But the numbers are not everything, as Topi quickly comments: “I think our whole operations have improved tremendously during the past years and we have for example developed new services that will show in the numbers potentially later on”. He notes that having focused a lot of effort on developing the company has inevitably taken a toll on the numbers in the short term, referring to the drop in the operating profit in year 2019. Topi highlights however, that what is most essential is not the numbers but what the company achieved in the area of improving the quality of construction. “That is very hard to put to numbers”, he says.

The care and attention on development has had great effects on Topi on the individual level as well. He has long been inspired by the ideal of the self-organising culture on helping a wider range of organisations to transform towards a self-organising culture. He has come to the conclusion, however, that Vertia is the place through which he can bring the most good to peoples' lives and work in a way that's in harmony with himself. In the interview with Amara Collaboration in November 2020, Topi explains seeing himself as a humane leader, aiming to be easily approachable and truly caring about his employees. He also emphasises the role of trust and the importance of giving space to the people around him. Topi describes his leadership style as systemic and explains that what matters is often not what he does but how the whole company works as a system. He describes Vertia as a wheel and explains that his own role is simply to make the wheel spin bigger and better. He points out that while for many, the word “systemic” might sound mechanistic, he doesn't see it that way at all, but all the human dynamics and so-called softer aspects are included in the system as well. Topi explains that this systemic approach allows him to focus on the long-term impacts and effectiveness of the organisation. In problem solving for example, the systemic approach guides his thinking towards finding a solution that enables the employees to solve the problem independently, rather than trying to solve everything himself.

Senior researcher Hannu Nieminen from Tampere University's TEOT research project comments that in the organisations that took part in the research regarding well-being in self-organising organisations, including Vertia, no opposition between the top management and the employees was detected. According to Nieminen, this creates a good ground for an authentic sense of community and sense of responsibility. “As Vertia has grown, we have moved more and more toward a model where even the big decisions are taken together”, Topi says. He explains that the amount of responsibility people take is not limited. “As long as you involve the people who the decision effects and who have expertise in the area, anyone can make decisions to serve the whole”, Topi says and adds that everyone also has freedom to intervene with the decisions others have made or are about to make, as much as Topi does as a CEO. As much as Vertia has developed over the past years, Topi doesn't seem to think there is such thing as being ready in self-organising. “It is constant practice and finding the balance”, he says and notes that while the current way of operating is better than the previous one, it is not perfect. Continuous development, inquiry and action is needed to be able to adjust and learn.

Case Vertia is a beautiful story and example of self-organising and the stage of organisational development that [Frederic Laloux](#) calls *Teal*, [Bill Torbert](#) calls *Collaborative Inquiry* and [Robert Kegan](#) calls *Deliberately*

Developmental Organisations. It illustrates Bill Torbert's theory about the need for the CEO, or whoever is the one developing the structures, to be operating and seeing the world from a late stage of human development for this organisational transformation to happen. "Too often I hear self-organising initiatives being just about developing the structures and a neglect of developing the individuals, needing the capacity to actually develop these structures", Heidi says and continues: "These organisations, like Vertia, are often financially successful. Just keep in mind, that this success comes from significant investments in the individuals, in the experimenting with the allowance to fail and correct and in the time and patience it takes to be on this journey".

Amara Collaboration has an extensive experience in supporting systemic organisational transformations such as this case, on individual, team and organisational level. We have people who have led organisational transformations, also towards self-organising structures, as the top leader and board member, as well as coached, consulted, facilitated and extensively researched this development. Do you notice the need and timeliness for individual development, team development or is your organisation ready for a transformation in the ways you think, act and operate? We operate globally and are happy to start with an online cup of coffee, tea or water to explore what you are dealing with.

References:

Interview with Topi Jokinen in November 2020 by Amara Collaboration

Interview with one of Vertia's long time employees in December 2020 by Amara Collaboration

Comments from Topi's developmental coach and chair of Vertia's advisory board Heidi Gutekunst

TEOT research project about employee well-being in self-organising organisations by Tampere University (2020, ongoing)

[Article by YLE about Vertia's self-organising culture](#) "Tässä firmassa ei ole johtajan titteleitä muilla kuin toimitusjohtajalla: Nyt se on tutkittu, millaista on tehdä töitä ilman pomoa", in November 2020

[#loistatyössäsi -podcast by Wise Consulting](#), episode 20 on 4.6.2019

[An article "Warren Buffet's and Your Own Seven Transformations of Leadership"](#) by William R. Torbert, 2020.

[A book "Action Inquiry, The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership"](#) by William R. Torbert, 2004

[A book "Reinventing Organizations"](#) by Frederic Laloux, 2014