

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Laurens starts off Team Rockstars IT in quite a saturated market: IT services, where the prizes are seemingly divided among a few major players. A market that the young company will shake up with fundamentally different choices.

Team Rockstars IT literally treats its employees like rockstars. You can probably imagine that the IT Rockstars love this. But what does it bring the organisation? In summary: a lot. In seven years, the organisation grew from zero to 500 IT professionals, with a staff turnover of 12.1 percent, a sick leave rate of 2.4 percent (2019-2022), an employee Net Promotor Score (eNPS) of 79 percent, a Rockstar satisfaction score and customer satisfaction score of 8.4 or higher, and an average annual revenue growth of 54 percent since its establishment. These are impressive figures. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is, as the saying goes. But these are the facts. The purpose of this list is not to boast about how great this company is, but to give you an idea of what an organisation can achieve when it truly prioritises its people.

It will not escape the attentive reader that we are not just talking about people-related benefits, such as low staff turnover, high Rockstar satisfaction, and high eNPS. In its as yet short lifetime, the organisation has also shown strong results in customer-related and business indicators, such as customer satisfaction and revenue growth.

BUT HOW?

The contrast could hardly be greater. One minute, Laurens Simonse was afraid to enter his own office because of the enormous load of misery that is about to be poured over him, the next minute Team Rockstars IT manages to attract and retain a heap of people in the challenging IT market. From the King of Spreadsheets to an exemplary people-first organisation.

This brings us to the question: but how? What happened in the meantime, to get from one end of the spectrum to the other? What does it take to truly make an impact on your people and with your organisation? The short answer: by not prioritising the customers, but rather the employees. Put people at the top of the list. To the smallest detail. People Focus 2.0. Preceded by a tough self-reflection, incidentally.

This sounds wonderful, an organisation that puts its people first, especially in these times. Potential coworkers like to hear that and we're in a historically difficult job market, so there is little to argue against. But what does that look like in concrete terms, and what does it yield? For instance, this means that as an organisation, you prioritise the interests of your people, even if they are not completely aligned with the customer's interests at a certain moment in time. It means that the management does not impose its own opinion on how the world should be, not even with the best intentions. And it means that the organisation is willing to pause or even take a step back if choices turn out differently than intended.

What it yields is what you have been able to read above. This is a list of results to be proud of. But that is not what this book is about. Because that is all very nice for Team Rockstars IT, but what do you get out of it? If you are in a different situation, or in a different market, or an organisation with an existing structure and a history, maybe with more conservative stakeholders or decision-makers? With many senior employees who resist change? Or if you are a non-profit organisation? How can you benefit from this then?

WHAT TO EXPECT

If you ordered this book expecting it to provide a detailed recipe for solving all your strategic staff problems, then this is a good time to disappoint you. You will not find that recipe in this book. Not because we don't want to share it, but simply because it doesn't exist. You see, the Rockstars Method is not actually a method, in the sense of a step-by-step plan with concrete decisions that you have to make about your organisational structure or the reward system. It is our firm belief that the essential fabric needed for a successful and sustainable people strategy cannot be captured in a step-by-step plan.

FOR THE ROCKSTARS METHOD IS NOT ACTUALLY A METHOD

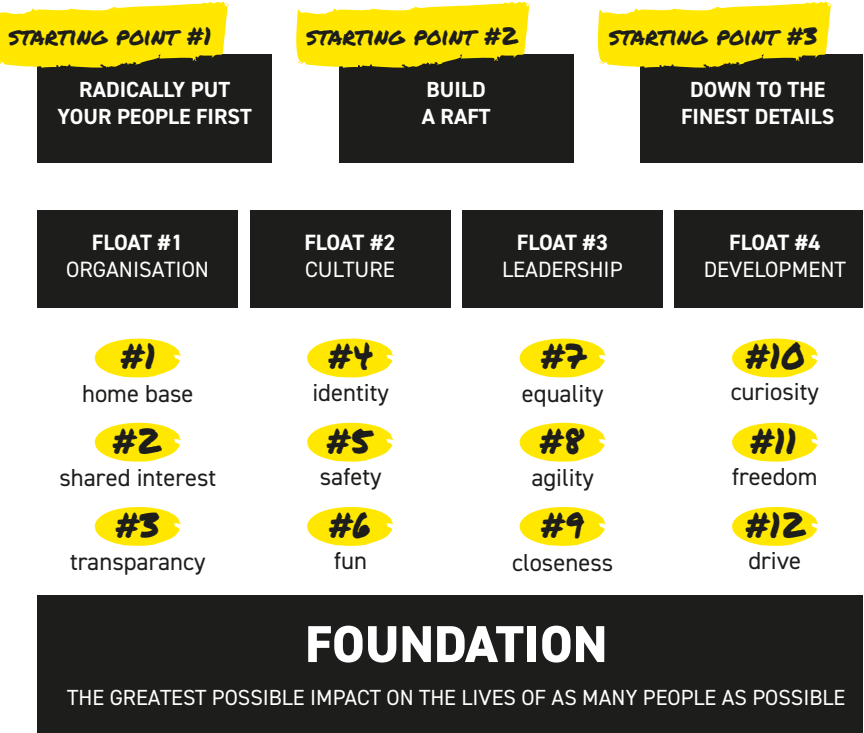
What you will however find in this book, are examples of choices that Team Rockstars IT has made and the considerations that preceded them. Stories from within the organisation regarding decisive points in its development. Things that went wrong or experiments that turned out differently than hoped. But also success stories, funny anecdotes, and sometimes downright vulnerable descriptions of the considerations behind dilemmas. In addition to the stories from within the organisation, you will also always find an analysis of what we see in the organisation, what this means or what stands out, and where you can start within your own organisation tomorrow morning, should you choose to do so.

See it as a documentary about Team Rockstars IT, an organisational biography with an observing narrator. Our goal is not to put the organisation on a pedestal, but to unravel what makes this organisation so successful, unearth the underlying floats and building blocks and how they can benefit you. This is exactly why we wrote it together. Laurens, as the founder and owner, knows all the ins and outs, backgrounds, stories, and dilemmas, and Raymond is a people strategy expert. With his company Double-OO, he has been analysing and researching a plethora of organisations for years, bringing a critical observing perspective from the outside.

FOUNDATION, STARTING POINTS, BUILDING BLOCKS

We have had many conversations and brainstorming sessions about the Rockstars Method, supplemented with extensive data analysis based on Double-OO's smart algorithms and dozens of interviews with people from within and outside of the organisation - with the sole purpose of unravelling what it is, exactly. Because it's not a gimmick. The challenge lies in making the underlying tissue visible. Because only then it will be accessible and useful to others, which is what we aim for.

That is how we created the Rockstars Method. Not a step-by-step plan, but a foundation, three starting points, and twelve building blocks that are essential for being a Rockstars organisation.



The building blocks help you tackle your specific challenges, not as the only correct answer, but as Lego bricks that are laid out on the table for you to play with. You can pick them up, use them, and combine them as you wish. It's not a universal step-by-step plan, but practical guidelines.

The building blocks are underlying values that are not dependent on the specific context of an organisation. You can consider and use each of the building blocks separately from the others. We have highlighted three for each float, bringing

the total to twelve building blocks. These are not 'the' twelve building blocks for the Rockstars Method. We could have come up with more building blocks. But we also wanted to keep it manageable, and with 73 building blocks, we won't be making anybody happy. So we have chosen twelve. It is our belief that each of these twelve building blocks is essential for the creation of a Rockstars organisation.

However, it may be that some of the building blocks are more important or challenging to your specific situation. Or maybe, on the contrary, they are not that relevant. That is for you to determine. Hence the term building blocks: you can pick them up and do with them what you think will help you. We do not claim to encapsulate the truth, your truth, in a twelve-step plan. We do not know your context and your people.

LET US SHOW YOU

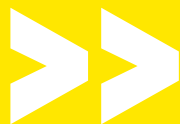
Besides the fact that the Rockstars Method is not a method, it is also most definitely not finished and it never will be. This book is not an endpoint, but a beginning. Our ambition is to inspire as many organisations as possible to put their people first. To guide you along the path of the method, and to develop and shape it together. To create a platform of Rockstar organisations that share our foundation and starting points, with leaders, entrepreneurs, and professionals who are willing to share their own inspiring stories and examples, so that others can learn from them as well. With the courage to also put dilemmas on the table, however painful that may be, from the conviction that it is the only way to move forward together. To have the greatest possible positive impact on the lives of as many people as possible. That is ultimately what we do it for.

#2 – STORY: NOT JUST SPORTS

A good friend of mine is a manager for various athletes. He doesn't flaunt it, but big (Olympic) champions like Tom Dumoulin, Marianne Vos, and Gianne Romme were among his clients. For years, I regularly joined Orlando to various competitions, and I noticed that he had a different dynamic with his athletes than we did with our employees back then. Orlando was busy building a career together with an athlete, to ensure that people reached great heights - sometimes literally.

What struck me about the way he worked was that Orlando did so much more than just closing a sponsorship deal or ensuring that someone had a contract with a new cycling team the following year. It ranged from arranging a dietitian for someone who wanted to lose a few kilos to better tackle the mountains, to making sure the hotels were booked for a training camp. Orlando's partner Rik is an accountant and tax specialist and takes care of all the financial matters, including investments and tax returns. It's a 360-degree approach, allowing the athlete to fully focus on the sport rather than having to worry about all kinds of peripheral matters. Even when something important happens in the life of one of his stars, such as the loss of a loved one, a birth, a marriage or divorce, or just a difficult time, Orlando is there with them too, supporting them in every possible way. Because only once these types of highs and lows have been dealt with, can someone continue to build on delivering top performances.

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THE FOUNDATION

Previously, you read about the results on the people side: high Rockstar satisfaction, low turnover, low absenteeism, many IT Rockstars bringing in new colleagues (referrals, in jargon), high eNPS. This leads to questions from curious entrepreneurs and managers from other organisations. Something we have frequently heard: 'Can you explain what your referral programme looks like? Because we too are working on redesigning ours.' And: 'How do you ensure that people don't leave in droves again?' But also: 'How do you get people to actually come to the events?'

These are all important and understandable questions, because these are the kind of things organisations face today. Simply put: how do you attract talented people, how do you retain them, how do you ensure continuous development, and how do you prevent them from burning out? These are questions that came up several times during the initial brainstorming sessions about the method. And quite quickly, we came to the clear conclusion: this is not what it's all about. This is not something you can influence. These are the outcomes, things that happen when you change your decisions surrounding the underlying core questions. They're not the cause, but the consequential damage. Consequential damage of the good kind, of course, but you know what we mean.

THE REAL STARS

Team Rockstars IT was never created with the idea of working towards low staff turnover with clever tricks - offering cool bits and pieces to high-quality professionals in exchange for positive LinkedIn posts. No. That did actually happen, but it was the result, not the foundation. So what was the foundation? The Rockstars Method is based on the firm belief that it essentially revolves around the people. These are the stars, the Rockstars. They have the knowledge, the talent, the drive, and the personalities to magically transform organisations'

wishes into software, programs, apps, and systems. They are the ones who organisations line up for, and who - to stick with the analogy - draw full crowds with ecstatic fans. Think of the manager of a rockstar in the music world, the one who arranges the venues, the conditions, and the promotion for the tour of a number of stars. It would be very strange if that manager put themselves before the rockstar. As if it's about them, and not about the rockstar. This has always been the image, this belief, which guided all decisions for the small team with which Team Rockstars IT started in 2015. The company literally derives its name from it.

#3 - STORY: THE NAME TEAM ROCKSTARS IT

We wanted to establish a brand that was exclusive. We knew we wanted to work with the absolute top performers, and that it had to be rebellious. But what name do you attach to something like that? Various names were considered: 'Elite...' While we were pretty enthusiastic about that one, we knew that it wasn't quite right.

Our former intern Tijs came up with the company TenX. They focused on IT developers who were ten times better than the average developer and called their developers Rockstars. 'Isn't that something we should be doing?' said Tijs. 'Why don't we just call our whole company that?' was my reply. And thus the name was born. Initially, I was convinced that a name is not decisive for the success of a company. Just look at the countless successful companies that simply chose the founder's last name as their company name (Ferrari, Heineken, Disney, Citroën or Philips) or even worse: are an abbreviation (ASML, IKEA, LEGO).

In retrospect, this name actually was decisive for our company. Because although we didn't really know it at the time, that name encompassed everything we wanted to stand for. Exclusivity, a rebellious image, and it immediately indicates who it's all about: the IT Rockstar. It's all about him or her! This was worth its weight in gold, and just really born by chance.

Nowadays, the company is running smoothly and the results are good, so it's easy to talk the talk now. But in the early years, it was not all that obvious.

During that period, the team – similarly to almost other every start-up - struggled to shape and convey the philosophy step by step, and to get (potential) IT Rockstars and clients on board. But even in those early years, you would never hear: 'Shouldn't we just go and...' with the dots signifying something that was not in line with the Rockstar philosophy. The conviction that this had to be the starting point was rock solid.

LIFE OR WORK?

The aforementioned belief that the employees are the stars is fundamental. The IT Rockstar stands at the centre of it all. This person, that individual. And therefore also their life. Just like with the Orlando's athletes, it's not just about arranging their professional or business matters, it's about having the greatest possible positive impact on their lives. Because only then can they flourish. This goes beyond work.

This may sound a bit exaggerated at first glance and you might think: 'Okay, all well and good, but in the end it's just a business transaction, employment. So it's about their work.' But management doesn't see themselves as employers, let alone as 'bosses' of the IT Rockstars. Compare it again with the role of a manager of a rockstar in the music world. The manager is hired by the rockstar, not the other way around. And wouldn't you, as a manager of a musical star, do everything to support and facilitate your crown jewel in all aspects of life, whether it's in terms of health or lifestyle, development or anything else that can help the rockstar feel on top? That's exactly what Team Rockstars IT does.

A LITTLE LOVE

What does it look like? An example is the creation of their own PA service package a few years ago to support IT Rockstars in various aspects of their personal lives as best as possible. For instance, they noticed that some IT Rockstars had a strong desire to share their lives with a partner. However, not everyone was interested in Tinder adventures, especially if you're more introverted, which applies to a portion of IT professionals. For this reason, the organisation set up a dating service to truly assist its employees in that area. Of course, everyone is free to decide whether or not to use it. Another striking example lies in the overheated housing market. It is quite stagnant, especially in major cities, and

young professionals are greatly affected by it. The same goes for IT Rockstars. Additionally, a substantial part of their financial compensation consists of a flexible bonus, which will be discussed later. So they made arrangements with a financial institution to better understand the flexible portion of their income, and now they can largely include it when applying for a mortgage. This makes a significant difference when you need to outbid others for your coveted dream home.

These are examples. It is not about simply arranging a few practical matters in the lives of your people, but actually understanding what is important in their lives at this moment. What drives them, what holds them back, what keeps them awake at night? And then, to see what options you have to allow you to make a positive contribution to it. Not as a transactional deal ('If I make sure you can buy that house, I want you to commit to us for at least three years'), but as a relational starting point, to really have meaning for your people.

RELATIONSHIP, CONNECTION, BOND

Something that we learned through trial and error is that a lot of things need to go right before you can actually make a substantial positive impact on the lives of your people. You have to be close to them, curious and open, have people's trust, listen, listen, listen, be creative in considering possible solutions, other interests and motivations, develop the right form and implementation, genuinely evaluate how it turns out and adjust if necessary. The inevitable downside is that things often go wrong too.

**IT ALWAYS COMES DOWN
TO THE RELATIONSHIP,
NOT THE TRANSACTION**

Nevertheless, it always comes down to the relationship, not the transaction. People can tell within three seconds which one of the two you, as a leader or manager, really care about. This relationship will be reciprocal. If, in collaboration with your people, you succeed in creating an organisational culture, a

working method, and the type of mutual interaction that allows for solutions that benefit both the people and the organisation, you will have gained a lot. Because from that relationship, the connection and bonds will also arise. From person to person, and (thus) also from your people to the organisation. This bond will be a whole lot stronger than an employment contract and a business card.

I JUST KNOW

It is best compared to a solid friendship. Just think about your best friend and answer the following question: how do you know for sure that this person will be there for you? Simply because you are you? Out of love, friendship, or personal involvement, not as a transaction or in exchange for something else? 'You can come cry on my couch about your broken-up relationship for the next two weeks, but only if you help me clean up the attic next month.'

The chances are quite high that after careful consideration, you might think, 'It's kind of hard to pinpoint exactly. I just know.' It may feel like an unsatisfying or incomplete answer, but that's how our system works, how our intuition is designed. We can process many more signals than we are consciously aware of. Our intuition throws all observations into a big barrel filled with our knowledge, talents, and experiences. Just blend it with the magical intuition blender, and voilà: 'I just know!'

This is also a statement that frequently emerged in interviews with Rockstars. When delving into a remark about the authenticity of the organisation's foundation or the subtle difference between doing something for the people or for the positive consequences it can have.

'I just know.'

THE FOUNDATION IN BRIEF

The Rockstars Method is based on the firm belief that it essentially revolves around people - they are the stars, the Rockstars.

The idea is to have the greatest possible positive impact on their lives, as it is only then that they can thrive. This goes beyond work. It requires a relational starting point instead of a transactional deal. People can smell within three seconds which of the two is ultimately your intention as a leader or manager.

ROCKSTARS CHALLENGE



At the end of each section, we present you with a Rockstars Challenge. This challenge consists of a number of questions and aims to challenge you to assess to what extent your organisation aligns with the Rockstars Method. Whether you do or don't do it is not necessarily good or bad, but it will have different consequences for you, your people, and the organisation.

The goal is not to judge yourself, to determine whether you are a decent person or whether the organisation is good or bad. We do invite you to be truly honest, even if it may be uncomfortable at times. So take a deep breath and give yourself an honest answer.

- 1 How do you recognise whether the connection between your organisation and people is essentially transactional or relational? What examples come to mind?
- 2 In what way did your organisation have a positive impact on your own life or that of a colleague, without any concrete (business) benefit in return?
- 3 What question, key performance indicator (KPI), or criterion is the guiding factor when evaluating a business initiative or investment? What stands out to you?
- 4 Do you primarily focus your energy on the positive impact you can have on the lives of your people, or on what you hope it will yield (such as reduced turnover, lower absenteeism, more new hires, increased efficiency)?
- 5 How often did you think while reading this chapter, 'Right, that's not going to work for us because...'?



STARTING POINT 1: **RADICALLY PUT YOUR PEOPLE FIRST**

The Rockstars Method is about maximising the positive impact on the lives of your people, as mentioned in the previous chapter. It sits on a relational rather than a transactional foundation. From this foundation, three starting points follow. Without any of these three points, you cannot call yourself a Rockstars organisation. The first and probably most obvious starting point is: radically put your people first.

Nowadays, you don't have to try very hard to read in the (social) media about organisations that put their people first. Or rather, organisations that claim to do so. Often supported by inspiring quotes, such as Richard Branson's 'Take care of your people and they'll take care of your business.'

BUT FIRST JUST THIS....

Piece of cake, right? Just put your people first and you're done. If only it were that easy. Because any organisation can willy-nilly claim to put its people first, and as long as that doesn't conflict with another interest, you can get away with it.

In practice, we find examples of organisations that put their people first – right until something else comes up that is more important. Then you hear: 'Our people come first, but of course not if it deviates from what a customer wants.' Or: '...except during the first quarter, because that's crunch time.' Or: '...as soon as we've implemented the new system.'

These are all important examples and arguments, and we say that without irony. Naturally you have to keep your customers satisfied, because ultimately they also pay your people's salaries, right? Even a Rockstars organisation is deeply focused on the customer's interest. Without it, an organisation cannot be successful, which is a prerequisite for a sustainable business model. If we draw a parallel here with the world of artists, you can compare it to the difference between a manager and a booking agent. The latter arranges performances at a certain location and receives compensation for it - a purely commercial role. Whether that performance fits in with the development or image of the artist, results in an over-booked diary and travel schedule, putting the artist's health at risk, the booking agent couldn't care less. For a manager, it's a whole different story. They have a much longer-term vision with the artist, including artistic, business, and personal development. They work together towards shared dreams. For one, it's about the person, the artist, for the other, it's about the gig.

If you prioritise your people until it clashes with another interest, it's a fair conclusion that you do not prioritise your people. Because it is precisely at the moment when two important objectives conflict with each other that you have to take a stand. The and-and strategy then no longer works. The key question is therefore which choice you make at that moment. That choice defines your organisation.

#4 - DILEMMA: ROCKSTAR SAYS NO

After months of acquisition, we secured a large financial institution as a client. It was a euphoric moment, so pull out the champagne! A project request followed immediately. The first IT Rockstar went to visit, but found the project uninteresting. The second and third came to the same conclusion: I don't want this project. The problem, in short, was that it involved very specific and outdated software, which they considered to be detrimental to their development. Besides, the culture didn't match either. So what do you do then? Because the knee-jerk reaction of a business owner is: the customer asks, we deliver.

We decided to stick to our starting point: the IT Rockstar is the one making the decision. Thus, at that time, we did not fulfil the client request. This starting point had already been discussed with the client in advance, and they were actually pretty impressed by it. In theory, at least, because

naturally, the message that we could not fulfil their request still led to a big disappointment. This was certainly true for the sales team too, who saw their hard work undone. It led to a lot of frustration. The relationship with the client was ultimately preserved, although it required some dialogue. But we didn't do many projects together, as it never became a match for our IT Rockstars.

WHAT ARE THE CHOICES YOU MAKE?

It is not necessarily better to prioritise your people over your customers or other interests. However, it does have different consequences. Because what if you gently force a job onto a professional that does not align with their development path? Possibly with some sugar coating? 'It is an important client and I am so happy I can rely on you,' or 'The next exciting job will be yours,' or 'I won't forget this during your next evaluation!' It may persuade a professional to agree, but is the organisation better off? And what does it mean for the people?

The firm belief is: what is best for the Rockstar is best for everyone. Because if you force a professional to do a job against their will, there is a high chance that the professional will leave the organisation in the near future, and then everybody loses. Plus, all professionals will realise: when it really comes down to it, we do not come first..

DO AS YOU SAY, SAY AS YOU DO

It's not a gimmick. You cannot proclaim the motto 'We put our people first' expecting to reap all the benefits, while deviating from it when it doesn't suit you. 'Look, surely they'll understand!' On the contrary. We firmly believe that it's better to tell people that you prioritise your customers over proclaiming that you put your people first when that's not the case. In the latter case, your credibility is at stake and that is downright harmful.

An additional complication is that there is no such thing as 'the organisation'. An organisation consists of a (large) number of people, each with their own roles, responsibilities, preferences, and motivations. So it's great if a leader, an executive team member, or the person responsible for HR or People & Culture

DISCOVER HOW TO WIN BY RADICALLY PUTTING YOUR PEOPLE FIRST

Treat your people like rockstars and be amazed by the results. Any company can apply the Rockstars Method to become a magnet for talent and achieve strong results, just like Team Rockstars IT did. If, that is, you are willing to put employee satisfaction at the very core of the organisation, and ingrained into the smallest details.

In this book, Raymond de Looze and founder Laurens Simonse unravel the fundamental building blocks of the Rockstars Method. Using concrete examples, the authors show not only what works, but also what challenges you may face when radically putting your people first. How do you find out what people really want? How do you make sure they share the core values? And how can you translate a dating service and hand-painted leather jackets to your organisation?



LAURENS SIMONSE IS FOUNDER AND OWNER OF TEAM ROCKSTARS IT. RAYMOND DE LOOZE IS PEOPLE STRATEGY EXPERT AND FOUNDER OF DOUBLE-00, WHICH HELPS ORGANISATIONS MAKE MORE IMPACT ON THEIR PEOPLE. TOGETHER THEY OFFER A UNIQUE INSIGHT INTO THE SUCCESS AND DILEMMAS OF TEAM ROCKSTARS IT, AND TAKE YOU ON THE PATH TO WORKING DIFFERENTLY.



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