



“We at Winner train about 5,000 managers every year. Each manager leads 40 people, on average. All in all, we impact nearly 200,000 professionals a year.”

INTERVIEW Robert Gieling, inspiring trainer & coach

Life is about living your dream, and sharing it. Follow your heart

Robert Gieling (38) is entrepreneur, trainer, coach and partner in Winner. He is also a husband, father of four children, pilot and mountaineer. He's a man with a passion for authenticity and awareness.

Leadership is awareness of yourself and the ability to reflect on yourself. To know who you are and what you want to mean to others. To lead is to know your passion and to do your thing in the 70 or 80 years that you hopefully walk on this planet. Good leaders inspire and energize people. They make things happen, even without words.

Authenticity is to live your life in line with your essence and to set your own course. It's sad how many people don't choose their own path through life – and they don't even see it! I've worked with large organisations, so I know about the pressure there is to do things you don't really want to do. It takes guts to follow your own heart but authenticity is doing just that: knowing who you are and what you want to give to others.

Leaders facilitate, and so do trainers. A course is never about me, it's about the growing awareness of the participants. I don't like being in the limelight.

> What did you want to become when you were 18? And what was your ambition when you were 29?

At the age of 18, I didn't think much about what I wanted to do. I was naive, consumptive, a hedonist. I enjoyed life and I wanted to fill my chocolate box with things that tasted nice, so that's what I went for.

At 29, my box was full and I was addicted to chocolate. I also felt very empty. I'd become everything I'd been brought up to think I should be. I was successful, made more than enough money and held a prestigious job. But I was thoroughly unhappy, in the middle of

an existential crisis, and didn't have a clue what I was supposed to do next, who I was and what I wanted to mean to others. So I started looking for new input. I got a coach, started to read, did awareness groups and started to meditate. Four years later I started my own company and two years after that I met Wilbert and became a partner at Winner. Home at last.

Mountain climbing helps me a lot. I need it to stay happy. I'm really glad that Hedwig, my wife, gives me the space to go on expeditions. Climbing makes me a better man, husband, father and colleague. And a better trainer and coach, of course.

Now I am 38. I know who I am and what I can do for others. I am where I belong, doing what I love to do, living my dream and following my heart. Working with people, witnessing and coaching people who are going through the same process I went through. I fully appreciate it, even when it's painful. That's just a part of the process: pain often precedes a new insight.

> **Real Life Leadership is based on connecting with yourself, with your team, with your organisation and ultimately with society. How do you see this?**

As you connect to yourself by developing your self-awareness, you can make contact with others. Then you can start to inspire and mobilize people. You don't have to do anything special to achieve that, just be who you are. Be self-confident and close to your authentic core.

Joshua, my eldest son, has ADHD, he's very smart but also very different from other children and he doesn't learn in the traditional way. The entire school system is geared towards making him fit into the system, to make him 'normal'. At Winner, we work the other way around. Nobody fits – ever. In a way, we're all misfits. That's our beauty. If you can develop that uniqueness in yourself and others, if you can shape the organisation to make use of all those jewels, you are a natural leader – and a successful one, I'm sure of it.

We're not therapists, so our work is never just about personal growth. It's about personal development within the context of an organisation. What we do always has to be in line with the goals of the company. There's no opposition or conflict here, because both the individual and the organisation move in the same direction. That's the beauty of it. We secure the individual training points by also moving the organisation: by also training the boss and the organisation's top. That's typically Winner. Not thesis versus antithesis, but synthesis. Getting real. Moving together. Maturely.



Do you have a picture that really inspires or touches you?

A few years ago, we climbed to the top of a mountain in Switzerland, the Monte Rosa. We were late and it was already twilight. At one point, we were walking along a ridge no more than 6 inches wide, with the mountain dropping off for a mile on either side. I was tied to my buddy ahead of me, but I froze. I couldn't move forward or back. I just stood there, terrified. I knew that if I fell, I'd see my whole life, my wife, my children, everything, disappear before me. I experienced then that there is a deeper force in me which is very strong. I used that force to relax myself and get myself moving. We finished the climb, but as soon as we were back in safety, I started to cry. In extreme situations, including stressful moments at work, I always think of that life-saving force.

I also think Bono is an inspiration. He has the guts to confront world leaders and the discipline to follow his passion - against fierce opposition and criticism. And he gets results. Bono doesn't have to campaign; he could just spend his holidays in Hawaii. I also happen to like U2. I love stories about people who fight for their dreams for years. Like Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela.

We influence about 200,000 professionals a year. We ask: 'what are your genes as an organisation? How does your organisation contribute to society and to the world? We don't mean with an incidental gift, but through your day-to-day operations.' They're questions that can change the world.

> **Tell us about a successful or challenging situation.**

Yesterday, we had a final meeting with a group that we'd been training with for a year. The participants are high potentials of an international conglomerate. They gave their presentations to the Board of Directors and talked about how they sometimes hit on difficult spots during their training. What transpired from all their stories was how the Winner experience had changed them. They've come to understand new aspects of themselves, even connected with their essential being, their authentic core. Some of them have changed jobs; others have rearranged their work-private life balance or changed their teams. At moments like these, I'm so grateful I've found this meaningful line of work... or that it found me.

> **Talking about mountains... They say it's lonely at the top. Who or what inspires you?**

Dangerous situations inspire me to think about what life really means to me. My relationship with fear is about accepting fear. Not avoiding it, but overcoming it. Life can be bigger, life will be bigger, if you accept fear. By experiencing this myself, I can coach people to overcome their own fear of the unknown. We call ourselves trainers, but all we do is share. My job isn't about training. It's about connecting, about curiosity, about inspiration and sharing passion. It's about challenging people to follow their heart.

Lots of people inspire me. My wife inspires me, my children, my friends, especially Sander, my climbing mate. And my parents; my dad completely restructured his life after being diagnosed with rheumatism at the age of 48. There are gurus everywhere. I get inspired whenever someone opens up during one of our training sessions. And last week, there was a headline in the newspaper: "Boy of eight saves infant from drowning". It's not only the Gandhi's and the Mandela's who are inspiring, lots of people are. People like you and me... and Wilbert my business partner, of course. He's like an older brother!

> **What is your view on the social responsibility of business leaders? Do you know any inspiring leaders?**

I am convinced, that authentic leaders who stay on their own track, will become the world's top leaders. Rabobank chairman Bert Heemsker is one of them. I met him recently and the

way he gives his attention and connects with people makes him very authentic. I also think his vision on Rabobank is inspiring. He sees social responsibility not as a fashionable asset for Rabobank, but something that's in the company's genes.

> **What makes you happy when you look at corporate and political leaders? What makes you angry?**

I am happy to see leaders create the space for people to excel, instead of pursuing applause for their own ego. I get very angry when I see the opposite. Then I stand up and challenge it because I see how much harm leaders do when they take the energy away from the people who work for them. It becomes very clear in training courses. Some leaders create energy and creativity around themselves, but others are surrounded by fear and anxiety.

> **Today's corporate leaders need to possess different qualities than the leaders of 50 years ago. Which leadership qualities do you deem crucial and which ones are better not to have? Do you see a trend?**

It's crucial for a leader to connect with their people, to have a sense of purpose, to be an example and to have a strong backbone. The younger generation is looking for people who inspire and who lead the way. The instrumental way of leading people is a thing of the past.

Another important thing is permanence; taking the responsibility of leaving a legacy, of leaving behind good leadership, and having the ability to think outside the box.

The most successful companies demonstrate these qualities, aspects of great leadership. Jim Collins wrote about it in his book 'Good to Great', and Eckart Wintzen practised it with his cell model of a company. This inspired us at Winner to set up independent self-steering hubs in several European countries.

> **What would you wish future leaders? How can they become effective? What would be your advice to them?**

Have the guts to stay yourself. Cut the crap. Follow your heart. That's all, really.



“The summit of Mt Elbrus in Russia which Sander and I climbed for Right to Play. I find it more satisfying when I can give to others instead of just having a good time. It's quite inspiring to transcend the ego!”

