



BETTER CARE, BETTER NUMBERS

HOW SINT JACOB USED OBEYA TO WELCOME MORE CLIENTS AND CUT EMPLOYEE ABSENTEEISM IN HALF



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How Obeya reduced employee absenteeism from 22.9% to 9% and increased bed occupancy by 8% in seven months, while improving the quality of care.

This case study is part of a broader effort to understand how Obeya works in real organizations, under real pressure. In this article, Wendy Manders shares the story of Sint Jacob, an elderly care organization in the Netherlands.

The case is not a polished success story about a perfect setting. Location Nieuw Delftweide was facing staff shortages, high absenteeism, financial pressure and rooms that remained empty, while older people in the region were looking for a place where they could receive the care they needed.

What makes this case especially relevant is the way Obeya became more than a visual management system. It created a shared work space where numbers, conversations and responsibility could meet. The wall made both sides visible: the hard data above the surface and the human patterns below it. As a result Sint Jacob welcomed more clients and cut employee absenteeism in half.

By sharing this story, Wendy shows that better performance and better care do not have to be competing priorities.



WENDY MANDERS

Founder of Dragonfly Company,
The Netherlands

Wendy Manders' work on lean, psychological safety, decision making and team dynamics underpins a central conviction: that performance and people are not competing priorities, they are two sides of the same system. Above the surface: goals, data, structure. Below the surface: trust, tension, energy, the things that shape every result but rarely appear on a dashboard. This thinking is at the heart of her book *De Werkplaats*, to be published in autumn 2026.

This case contributes to the growing body of evidence around Obeya as a visual management system and showing what becomes possible when both it is connected to the below the surface aspects.

COMPANY/CASE PROFILE



Sint Jacob, Haarlem, the Netherlands

Sint Jacob is an elderly care organisation in the greater Haarlem area. They provide care and support for older people, including long term care, rehabilitation and temporary stays.

Let me take you to one of the locations: Nieuw Delftweide. The pressure is structural: staff shortages, rising absenteeism, financial margins that leave little room for error. An older building, not the most inviting.

- Elderly care
- Company size: over 750 employees and 300 volunteers
- Foundation with two-member executive board
- 6 locations with central staff



Sint Jacob: 750+ employees and over 300 volunteers



65 employees at Nieuw Delftweide



Location Nieuw Delftweide: Bed occupancy: structural underperformance



Location Nieuw Delftweide: employee absenteeism: up to 22.9%

OBEYA PROFILE



- Implemented since: June 2025, in succession of earlier obeya's within Sint Jacob
- Type: physical
- Purpose: operational & strategic
- Position in organisation: location Nieuw Delftweide, MT level
- Meeting rhythm: weekly stand-up
- User groups: location manager, team leaders, quality nurses
- Builders: the obeya was initially set up by the location team itself. The data it runs on is now supplied and maintained by Finance, HR and Quality.
- Accessibility: Open, visible on location
- The obeya at Nieuw Delftweide is part of a wider network of obeyas within Sint Jacob. Each location runs its own wall.
- The obeya at Nieuw Delftweide started simple: brown paper on the wall, no polished design or complicated system. Just one agreement: we look at the same reality together, and we make decisions based on what we see.



Implemented since

June 2025



Purpose & Scope

Management team
Location



Type

Physical

URGENY & RATIONALE

Objectives

Sint Jacob had been working on understanding what was really going on beneath the surface. Recognising cultural patterns across the organisation and making agreements to change them, centrally and locally.

But culture change is stubborn. Patterns that are woven into the way people work, talk and avoid do not shift in a year. They need continuous attention. What was missing was a structure that connected the soft and the hard. Where cultural patterns met real data, and where reflection led to action, and action led to learning. Not as a project but as a permanent rhythm.

That is why they chose obeya. As a shared space for fact-based steering and completing the PDCA cycle together, connected with a people approach.



Trigger: sense of urgency

For three years in a row, Nieuw Delftweide struggled to welcome enough new residents, leading to rooms unoccupied. This led to financial pressure. At the same time elderly people in the region could not find a

proper home. The building was old: some rooms shared a bathroom in the corridor. The explanation was ready-made: this building simply wasn't attractive enough. It was a logical story.

It just wasn't the right one.

Context

The people at Sint Jacob chose this work because they care. They want to be there for their residents. Really there: not rushed, not understaffed, not distracted by problems that never get solved. But the care sector in the Netherlands makes that hard: staff shortage, a freeze on self-employed workers, growing complexity in care, tightening budgets. Nieuw Delftweide felt all of it.

The question was never whether something needed to change. The question was how to get enough grip to actually make it happen.

DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

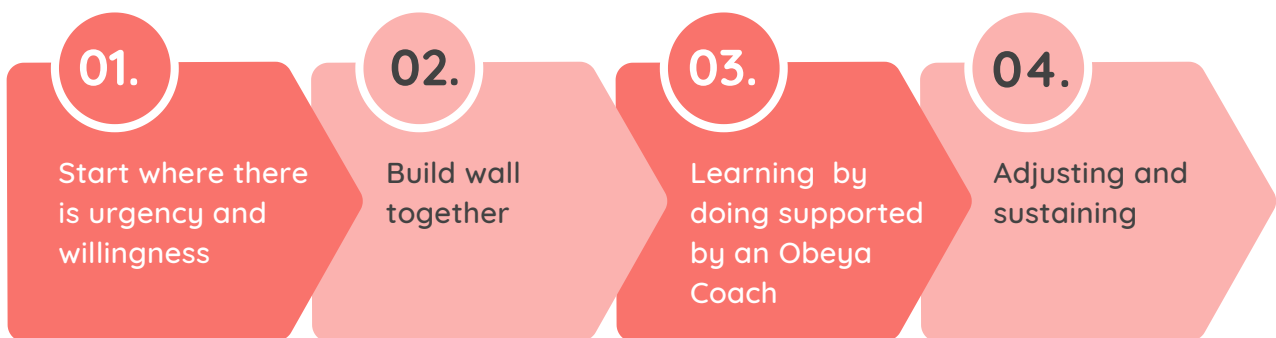
The approach was participatory, guided by Dragonfly Company as an external facilitator, and strongly sponsored by the executive board. That sponsorship created safety to try things, to be honest about what wasn't working, and to keep going when it got uncomfortable.

The rollout followed an organic logic. We started where there was genuine need and genuine appetite: teams that wanted this and leaders who were ready. From there, it spread, because others saw what it produced.

The way of working itself followed the same principle. Theory and doing happened at the same time. A short explanation, then straight to the wall. Questions answered where they arose, in the work, not before it.

There was always room for local input, keeping what worked and adapting where needed. The learning model was: I show you, we do it together, you do it yourself.

Everything was supported by e-learning for those who wanted to go deeper and by intervision sessions where managers could reflect together on what they were experiencing.



Challenges & enablers

Barriers, resistance

Space is scarce in elderly care. Physical space goes to residents, not staff. Finding a wall took creativity. Time was the same story: no slack in the schedule. So we didn't add a new structure. We connected to what was already there. Data was a real obstacle. Good KPIs weren't available from day one. We started with what there was and sharpened as we went, supported and committed by a BI and finance department.

The hardest step was the cascade to team level. Team members didn't see the point at first. But underneath the

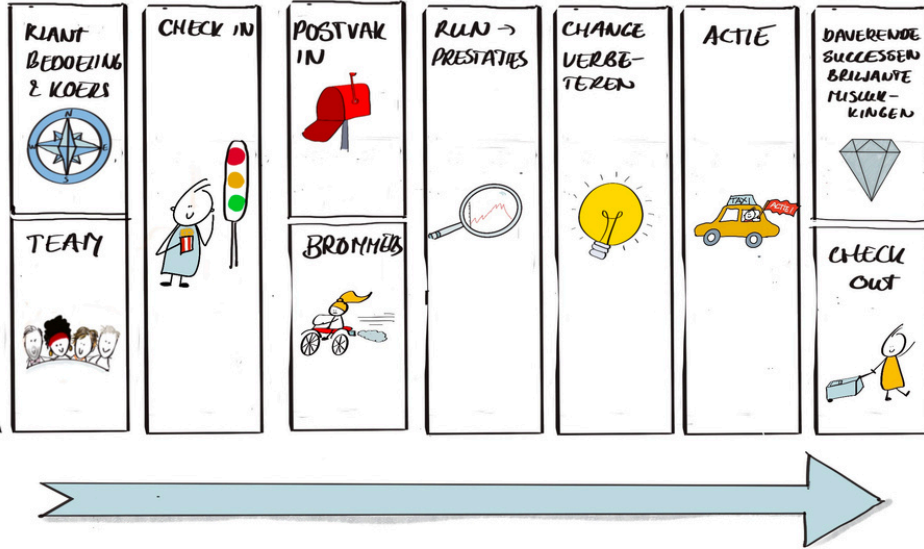
resistance was something urgent: Temporary employees did not want to work at a specific ward at New Delftweide anymore, because there was no structure, real contact or improvements. Once that became the starting point, this changed. Now they are among its strongest advocates.

Enablers

There were several enablers.

- Board sponsorship that was visible and consistent.
- A facilitator present from start to embedding.
- BI tooling that made performance genuinely visible.
- And the experience of results: nothing convinces like seeing your own numbers move.

LAYOUT, STRUCTURE & ARCHITECTURE



Physical setup

Brown paper on the wall, Post-its, printed graphs. No expensive tools or specialist software. Once the structure was established and the rhythm embedded, the brown paper made way for something more permanent: folders mounted on the wall, organised by station.

Stories found their place too: thank-you cards, photos. Small things that made visible what the numbers couldn't capture. The wall held both: the data and the human.

Seeing the connections becomes easier when everything hangs side by side on the same wall. And bringing people into that picture, showing them the whole, not just their part, makes the story easier to understand and easier to explain.

Integration

The financial result was connected to operational data from HR and planning. For the first time, patterns became visible that had previously been buried in averages.

Architecture

The wall follows a fixed flow, every station has its place. Every week the same route.

- Client, purpose & direction
- Team
- Check-in
- Inbox
- Performance
- Improvement
- Actions
- Learning: brilliant failures and resounding successes
- Check-out: enabling and inhibiting patterns in the obeya conversation

The design of the obeya explicitly included the below the surface parts. From the start, the check-in and check-out were not formalities. They were the moment to surface what was alive in the room.

Using a Deep Democracy approach, the check-in makes visible what people carry with them into the conversation. Different views are not smoothed over: every perspective has a place and every voice counts.

USE IN PRACTICE



MEETING RHYTHM

The location management team meets at the wall every week for one hour. Chairmanship rotates, not one person who always leads, but shared ownership of the conversation. Fixed role cards support the flow: timekeeper, scribe, challenger, ELMO. Everyone knows what is expected. The cards were tailor-made, based on the patterns the team had discovered in their own conversations. Later, they took the same cards into the other meetings on location.

DECISION-MAKING FLOW

What makes Nieuw Delftweide distinctive is that the wall does not stop at management level. On the ward, teams have their own version, tailored to the work of care: a check-in to start the day, the residents' agenda, dividing the work, checking in at the end on how things went, and handing over what didn't get done. Two KPIs anchor the ward wall: bed occupancy and absenteeism. The same numbers that live at management level, visible on the floor.

The treatment and quality teams share part of the same wall. Different conversations, overlapping picture. That way, everyone holds the same integral view of what is happening and meetings become shorter, sharper, and less repetitive.

And the wall does not stand alone. It is connected to the management team above and to the executive board. From board to bedside and from bedside to board.



**BETTER OUTCOMES
A BETTER PLACE TO WORK
AND ABOVE ALL: BETTER CARE**

OUTCOMES & VALUE

“ I often felt like all key indicators and improvement plans lived inside my head, and I had to give people occasional glimpses into it. With the Obeya on the wall and all its supporting visuals, it finally moved into a shared space. It brought clarity, calm, and structure and it made it much easier to explain to my team why certain decisions are made. “
 Kitty, location manager

“ It’s a useful guide for the day. Everyone knows where they stand. Halfway through you can redistribute tasks. That gives a sense of grip. I go with it, because it really helps. “
 Sandra, care giver

“ You’ll gain much more insight. Instead of having an audit once a year and then thinking a year later, “Oh yes, that was it,” you work with it throughout the year. You make the A3 visible, including improvement ideas and progress. “
 Sandra, clinical quality nurse

Bed occupancy

Within seven months, bed occupancy rose by nearly six percent. Keep in mind one bed is on average 135.000 euro’s a year. In 2025, a dip in bed occupancy lasted months, well into June or July before it recovered. In March 2026, there was a similar dip. It lasted two weeks this time. Same problem, but different response time, because they learned to steer

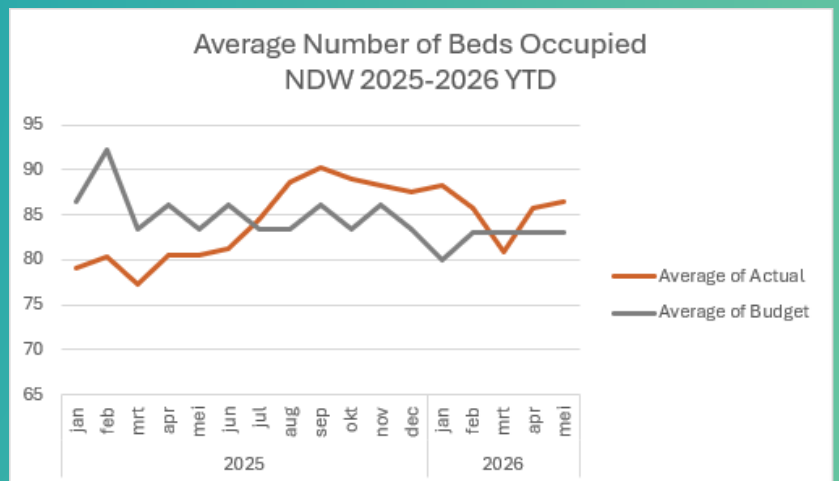
Employee absenteeism

At the peak, absenteeism at New Delftweide reached 22.9%. Team leader Heidi sent a message one morning: “Wendy, this is a happy moment. We’re at 9% now.”

Intangible outcomes

Director Gitta captured it in increasing numbers, but she didn’t start with those numbers. She started with “What I’m most happy about is that you get to better conversations.”

Bed occupancy 2025-2026



RISKS AND THREATS

Dependency on leadership

The approach worked at Nieuw Delftweide in large part because of location manager Kitty: her creativity and her energy, her willingness to make things visible that were uncomfortable. When a location manager changes, the wall stays. But the habit of honest looking needs to be maintained actively.

Scaling and absorption capacity

Once the team experienced what this way of working actually solved, the curiosity grew. But scaling is not just a question of willingness. It is a question of absorption capacity. How much can an organisation take on at once? Roll out too fast and the depth is lost. The

organic roll out, start where there is genuine need, let results do the convincing.

Persistent patterns

This is perhaps the most underestimated risk. What is woven into the carpet, the wallpaper and the ceiling does not come out in a month. Old habits, unspoken hierarchies, the tendency to explain away rather than investigate, these patterns are stubborn. The obeya makes them visible. But visible is not the same as gone. That takes maintenance. Continued facilitation. And the willingness to keep being honest, week after week, even when it is uncomfortable.

CONTINUITY & FUTURE OUTLOOK

Nieuw Delftweide was not a promising case on paper. Old building. Staff shortages. High absenteeism. Beds that stayed empty year after year. Easy to write off.

They didn't. They put the real numbers on the wall. They asked the uncomfortable questions. They looked together, every week, at the same reality, above the surface and below it. And something shifted, because a team started seeing what was actually happening, and took responsibility for changing it.

Bed occupancy up 8%, absenteeism down from 22% to 9%, staff satisfaction moving. Numbers that used to be excuses became steering information.

But the most important result cannot be measured. It is the moment a team stops waiting for someone else to fix it. When they look at the wall and say: we see it. We understand it. We know what to do.

That is what I have seen happen, time and again. In healthcare, in government, in financial services. The wall changes, and the problems change. What doesn't change is what happens to a team when they finally see the full picture, hard data and human reality, side by side.

Sint Jacob is continuing to build out obeyas across locations. Not through a top-down rollout, but through results. Teams that see what happens elsewhere want it too. That is the most sustainable form of growth. And the most honest proof that it works.



The Dutch edition of “De Werkplaats” will be available autumn 2026.

You have a team, an agenda and good intentions. Yet every week, you leave the meeting without real decisions. Problems pile up, meetings drain energy, and steering starts to feel like flogging a dead horse.

“De Werkplaats” offers a different way. Wendy Manders shows managers how to create one visible place where focus, figures, people and decisions come together. Not at an endless meeting table, but on the wall, where the team can see and discuss how things are really going.

The book combines structure with humanity. It helps you steer performance while also paying attention to what happens beneath the surface: what people think but do not say.

With cases from elderly care, government and business, De Werkplaats shows how teams can work with more clarity, calm and results.

Be the first to preorder

The Dutch edition of De Werkplaats will be published this autumn. Sign up using the QR code and be the first to hear when the book becomes available for preorder.

