



# Vulnerable & strong

COMBINING LEADERSHIP AND FRAGILITY  
FOR SUSTAINABLE PERFORMANCE

They might have a visible or invisible disability, either officially recognized or kept secret. Or they might have (or have had) a serious or chronic illness. Or maybe they've suffered from burnout. How does their company view these individuals? And how do they view their company? What does the company's treatment of such employees tell us about leadership? And if the way a company treats these vulnerabilities changes, can leadership change too? These are the questions that Sanofi France wants to explore.

As society makes new demands, and as the affirmation of the individual grows in strength, companies' internal organization, formalization of tasks and the role of authority are changing. These changes challenge the established principles of leadership based on the legitimacy of status, hierarchy and past experience.

Against this background, the way a company treats employees in vulnerable situations is becoming a key indicator of the organization's basic human principles, the relation it has with performance and the meaning it gives to this performance. How do things stand at present — and how will they stand tomorrow — at Sanofi France and, more generally, in our society? These are the themes we wanted to investigate with a survey conducted at Sanofi France in the summer of 2019.

## VULNERABILITY: LEADERS IN A DOUBLE BIND

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “MANAGING VULNERABILITY WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION'S “FRAMEWORK” AND “RECOGNIZING DISABILITY AS A SOURCE OF WEALTH”

**M**anaging” disability — and, more broadly, managing vulnerabilities — in a company is still largely interpreted from a perspective of the regulatory framework, moral obligation and compassionate diversity. As in society as a whole, management takes precedence over integration, and the shortcomings that need to be mitigated obscure the potential that could be exploited. We talk about disabled people rather than people with disabilities who are in a position to contribute fully to a common goal. Nevertheless, there are calls for a fresh perspective, for which individual differences would be seen first and fo-

remost as a source of riches, leadership and ultimately as an essential part of sustainable performance.

However, the transition from values to action has been slow. The latest Kantar barometer on employment, disability and prevention in businesses<sup>1</sup> indicated that many prejudices still remain. Although the companies interviewed identified numerous advantages to implementing a disability policy, the benefits were expressed mainly in terms of employee pride, solidarity and corporate reputation. Only one in four respondents thought that a disability policy could have a positive impact on the performance of their company, with one in ten seeing no benefits.

“We have introduced a number of initiatives in our company in recent years,” says Guillaume Leroy, CEO of Sanofi France. “But I realized that the topics of disability and vulnerability weren't always understood in the right light. Our solution to these complex questions is mostly organizational, which is a good starting point. But I'm sure we're mis-

sing out on unthought-of resources that could benefit leadership and performance.”

Ten Sanofi employees offered first-hand accounts of their experiences: Benoît, Claire, Corinne, Elizabeth, Fabienne, Géraldine, Guillaume, Hélène, Isabelle, Jan and Laurent. Some of these individuals have a disability, visible or invisible; some have had an illness or suffered from burnout that kept them away from their workplace for a lengthy period; some are responsible for managing people in fragile situations; and some have simply chosen to help change people’s views and practices.

When asked about their perceptions about how disability, illness or burnout are viewed, everyone shared an identical observation: that a feeling of incomprehension still reigns. Take the example of Fabienne who, after suffering from burnout, also experienced a period of intense frustration:

“I wanted to get back in the saddle after 10 months off work, but it was difficult to find a job that matched my new aspirations. I often wonder whether this burnout hasn’t acted as a brake on my professional development, even if no one has ever said so. I was a manager myself, and I’m afraid that someone who hasn’t been through a burnout will be preferred to me. My fear is that I’ll be seen as being in remission, and that I might have a relapse.”

Elizabeth, for her part, admits that she hesitated before deciding to speak out: “The question of how people look at you is an important one. It took me a long time to accept and acknowledge my disability, and even now only my manager and a handful of people on my team know about it. I don’t want to wear the ‘handicap’ label around my neck on a daily basis. I don’t want to go to work and see pity in the eyes of everyone around me.” Benoît sums up his position: “I’ve been turned down for jobs because of my disability. And I’ve had difficult times when, having expressed my tiredness at certain periods, the only reply I got was being advised to look after myself or even stop working.”

Are these simply isolated points of view? Far from it. In “*Que font les 10 millions de malades ? Vivre et travailler avec une maladie chronique,*” the researchers Dominique Lhuillier and Anne-Marie Waser urge us to listen to the 10 million working-age people who live with one or more chronic illnesses, including diabetes, cancer, AIDS or anatomical or functional disorders (blindness, multiple sclerosis, etc.). As the authors state, these individuals “put energy and ingenuity into dealing with their symptoms” and “fiercely reject

representations of them as being sick, passive or victims, which serve to undermine their identity and put them in pigeonholes that they rebuff.”<sup>2</sup>

## FABIENNE

“I joined Sanofi in 2000, and quickly threw myself into my career and working on behalf of the group. My commitment was rewarded: a few years ago, management suggested that I set up a subcontracting project with some Indian partners, and I took up the challenge with enthusiasm. This new position meant I managed teams in India in the morning, in France during the day and in the United States at night. And everything in a tense environment. I thought I had been weathering the storm when a female colleague told me to go and see a doctor. And she did well to: I was signed off for two weeks, and then for 10 months after an attempt to come back ended in disaster. While I was off work, I was lucky enough to be able to see a clinical psychologist. As a result of the work we did together, I didn’t go back to my old job even though my manager had always been understanding with me. I decided that I should put the burnout to good use and use it as a springboard for a new start. I resumed my studies to become an assistant coach. When I came back — part-time, at first — I undertook several long-term assignments, first in the field of CSR and then alongside my former manager but in a more transversal role. I’m currently finishing a new assignment, this time in an HR department. I’d now like to find a permanent position again, even though I sometimes feel that the fact I’ve had this burnout closes doors when I actually have much more to offer than before. My dream now would be to be able to change the way people look at burnout and support people who have gone through the same ordeal as me. Our company has already learned how to embrace and grow an initiative as bold as *Cancer & Work: Acting Together*, and I’d like this project to be reproduced in other areas.”

1. Baromètre Emploi, Handicap et Prévention en Entreprise, Kantar — Club Être, May 2018; conducted among 240 leaders and HR departments.

2. Lhuillier D., Waser A.-M. 2016. *Que font les 10 millions de malades ? Vivre et travailler avec une maladie chronique*. Erès.

Benoît adds, “There’s an urgent need today to revisit the concept of ‘acknowledging’ a disability, a concept that can no longer only be about acknowledging the handicap itself but more about bringing energy and a desire for transparency to a corporate mission or cause. That’s why we have to shift from a model that is, at best, empathic, accommodating and facilitating — but also highly regulated — towards a new, attractive and engaging model. It has to incorporate vulnerability as a new source of wealth, in the same vein as experiential, sexual or cultural diversity.”

## BENOÎT

“I have a postgraduate degree (DEA) in immunology and a postgraduate diploma (DESS) in bioinformatics, and I joined Sanofi Pasteur in 2005. I’ve been a data manager, a project manager in a support function for the clinical department and head of functional planning in R&D before pivoting to the group’s HR department a year ago. I also suffer from two distinct and progressive pathologies, one since childhood, and I now get about in a wheelchair. I’m athletic, and I do high-level parasport fencing and wheelchair tennis as a leisure pursuit. Last of all, for some time I’ve been the company’s contact person for diversity issues. Sports and illness are true catalysts of the values and qualities that are central for me, and that I experience in my professional and personal life. During my working career at Sanofi, I’ve had the chance to meet many fine people and work with managers who knew how to trust people and give everyone the confidence needed to thrive and mine their potential. Real leaders, in my opinion! I have seen that this attitude makes it possible to build teams that are more creative, more fulfilling, more resilient and therefore more efficient. At a more macro scale, I’m convinced that the company demonstrates a genuine willingness to handle disability differently, even if not everything is perfect. I’ve also noticed that, although our leaders are proactive on this issue, it’s difficult to mobilize people in an organization, especially local managers, who are sometimes too overwhelmed by the daily grind to have the time to handle situations that can be delicate. I’d like our company to set an example and give itself the resources to support them.”

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “BEING A GOOD LEADER” AND “BEING AN AUTHENTIC LEADER”

“For a long time, the notion of leadership was synonymous with the person who occupied the leadership position,” says Rodolphe Durand, professor of strategy, Purposeful Leadership chair and director of the Society and Organizations Center at HEC Paris. “The leader’s mission used to be clear: it was up to him or her to decide what tasks to perform. They were the boss and their choices were not to be contested. But this vision of leadership has gradually evolved, with new expectations emerging. Leaders have to advance their entity, department or management team, almost regardless of the means implemented.” In this sense, “good leaders” put pressure on their teams, follow established protocols for managing change and analyze the organization based on its subgroups, which support, oppose or remain neutral regarding the decisions the leader initiates. Good leaders are “winners” who lead other winners in their wake. They make an impression either with their detailed knowledge of the relevant subjects or their cunning at getting projects done — or both.

This performative approach to leadership has been challenged in recent years. Increasing numbers of employees are rebelling against its principles, especially among the younger generation. “They’re critical of change management procedures and dispute performance objectives. And they resign if leaders use their authority to dictate a single vision and force members of their team to kowtow,” argues Prof. Durand.

In this context, a host of new models of leadership are being put forward. Although a variety of adjectives may be used to describe them (such as authentic, centered or aligned<sup>1</sup>), they are all based on a common set of ideas. Foremost among these is recognizing that trial and error is a source of learning, together with a constructive approach to vulnerability. The link between these two practices is close. Contemporary organizations have to deal with the notions of risk, fragility, weakness and failure, which they had fiercely kept at arm’s length for decades. “But they’ve turned the corner, and many companies are now adopting robust managerial practices and cultural symbols to unshackle their employees. They’re inviting them to share details about the progress of their projects with their peers on a regular basis, as

well as their difficulties and failures. Knowing how to describe the problems they've encountered openly and honestly, and inviting the group to give constructive feedback, are becoming recognized behaviors that are appreciated more and more." These comments are also reflected in the practices at Sanofi itself, as evidenced, for example, by the SmartFail workshops offered in Sanofi Pasteur's R&D department (see box).

Prof. Durand finds that this new approach to leadership "plays on the deep motivators of employees as individuals with all their strengths and weaknesses, and on each individual's authenticity." Revealing and accepting vulnerabilities, embracing and helping others grow, understanding that intelligence springs from the collective and is not owned by or the property of the "leader" — these are all action principles that meet employees' increasing expectations. In return, recognizing that everyone may make mistakes and be vulnerable helps build trust in others. The benefits of these attitudes are not limited to the interactions between an individual in a vulnerable situation and another employee. They extend to all the teams where these relations and relationships develop and unfold. Hence the importance of the accounts and actions of people with disabilities, chronic illnesses or psychological stress, and those of the employees with whom they work on a daily basis — not to mention the people witnessing these relationships, who benefit in return from these interactions. Embracing otherness means

recognizing individuals in all their many dimensions.

Research<sup>2</sup> has shown that while the first form of leadership can resolve localized crises or emergency situations, it cannot be set up as a permanent *modus operandi* because it puts employees under pressure and undermines trust within an organization. The emerging models, for their part, offer a more sustainable type of performance because they are based on listening to employees and managing the effects linked to multiple vulnerability scenarios<sup>3</sup>. It remains to be seen whether this promise will be implemented in managerial practices beyond superficial declarations of intent and humanist claims.

1. For example: Barsh J. and Lavoie J. 2014. *Centered Leadership*, Crown Business Publishing; Craig N. 2018. *Leading from Purpose*, Hachette Books; George B. 2007. *True North — Discover your Authentic Leadership*, Jossey-Bass.
2. Kotter, J. P. (2008). *Corporate culture and performance*. Simon and Schuster. Durand, R., & Calori, R. (2006). Sameness, otherness? Enriching organizational change theories with philosophical considerations on the same and the other. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(1), 93-114.
3. Van Knippenberg, D., & van Kleef, G. A. (2016). Leadership and affect: Moving the hearts and minds of followers. *Academy of Management Annals*, 10(1), 799-840.

## SETBACKS ARE THERE TO BE SHARED!

"SmartFail originated in an internal innovation competition, and the first workshops were set up in 2018," explains Claire Vigne, leader of the project and a biostatistician at Sanofi Pasteur R&D. "We now organize three or four sessions every quarter with six to eight participants. The workshops are facilitated by employees for employees, and psychological security is a key requirement. We're encouraged to talk about our setbacks so we can leave them behind, step aside and consider new avenues for the future. When we talk about setbacks, we're not talking about mistakes but more about uncomfortable scenarios. For instance, when a project hasn't given the expected results or when it's been difficult to go back to work after a long-term illness. The feedback about these workshops is very positive. Everyone opens up about their difficulties and finds out about other people's problems in a judgment-free context. They leave with innovative ideas for managing future scenarios, get their confidence back and rediscover the desire to take risks. The SmartFail workshops show that the simple act of talking about what makes us feel vulnerable can make us more effective.

# SANOFI FRANCE: THE FIRST ACTING TOGETHER INITIATIVE

“On the basis of these findings,” says Guillaume Leroy, “we now think it’s necessary to bring together ideas about vulnerability and leadership so we can create an environment that benefits the men and women working at Sanofi, society as a whole, as well as the company itself — whose purpose is to provide health solutions to millions of patients across the world.” Leroy adds that he hopes that working with people in vulnerable situations is not experienced as “losing an opportunity” for teams or managers but as an opportunity for inspiration, creativity and cohesion for the Sanofi community.

This ambition cannot take shape without the company’s setting out to embrace the many different types of vulnerability. In this respect, a first step has been taken in France with the Cancer & Work: Acting Together initiative. A theoretically based approach, it was launched in 2017 by employees directly or indirectly affected by cancer, with the help of Prof. Catherine Tourette-Turgis, founder of the Université des Patients, and the Comment Dire agency directed by Maryline Rébillon.

Hélène is the co-founder of Cancer & Work: Acting Together. “When I came back to Sanofi after nine months of sick leave, I needed to share what the

experience of being ill had taught me: when others listen to you and look kindly on you, it’s a powerful motivator for moving forward. I soon realized that the priority was to get better and that it was going to take longer and be more difficult than expected. I needed somewhere to be able to sit down, where I could allow myself to be angry, tired, experience doubt and understand... In short, for every aspect of my being to be made welcome during this recovery period, which can last a long time. In fact, over six out of ten cancer patients still suffer from effects related to the disease or its treatment five years after being diagnosed<sup>1</sup>. I received support, from the occupational health physician, the social worker and my HR, but there was something missing. With the other project leaders, we imagined creating a space where you’d be free and could build yourself back up, and which would be open to everyone: people who are or had been ill, caregivers, colleagues and managers. Our hope was to bear this vulnerability together as part of a constructive approach that would by extension help the company improve the way it handles this scenario, which has become commonplace: 40% of the 400,000 new cancers reported every year in France concern people who are working.”

Isabelle and her boss Géraldine, who are both managers, have taken part in the Cancer & Work: Acting Together adventure from the beginning. “We don’t always want to talk about cancer,” says Isabelle, who had to stop work for 14 months for treatment. “The Cancer & Work branches create a space for dialogue, openness and candor that is rare even among family and friends. Because meeting people who have experienced the same thing helps you express yourself plainly and frankly.” “For my part,” adds Géraldine, “I’ve come face to face with the illness several times as a manager and I’m still facing it at the moment. It’s a shocking situation, which can be difficult on the operational level but is especially hard on a human level, since the affected person needs to be supported every step of the way — from the announcement of the diagnosis until they return to work and sometimes for many months afterwards — but also their colleagues and ... yourself.”

## THE CANCER & WORK: ACTING TOGETHER

The Cancer & Work: Acting Together program is unprecedented both in terms of its scope and interdisciplinarity. It has resulted in satellite branches being rolled out in all 34 of the group’s sites in France, each combining six competences: occupational health, social care and human resources, together with an employee who is a patient, a caregiver and a manager. The Cancer & Work: Acting Together branches form a network of spaces for listening, sharing and action, where any scenario can be tackled from all angles to jointly develop a way to help people remain at or resume work.

1. VICAN5 Survey, Institut National du Cancer, May 2018

# NEW SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

In the course of the discussions with employees, a single conviction emerged: people who are vulnerable can be inspiring models for leadership in several key respects.

## AUTHENTICITY, DETERMINATION AND COURAGE

“People with disabilities, in addition to their individual skills and personal leadership, provide other people with an example of authenticity — we can’t ‘cheat’ with our bodies — as well as determination, courage and willpower.”

**Benoît**

“For my part, being a patient has opened my eyes to certain management skills. I now understand that it is possible to accept weaknesses and, even more so, to share them. I’m convinced now that articulating your weaknesses transforms them into strengths.”

**Isabelle**

## OPENNESS

“I don’t think a disability can give you abilities you didn’t have before, but it does help to strengthen some of them. So my physical limitations make me more understanding of others. Even if we don’t experience the same thing, I fully understand that the people around me may also face difficulties, and that it’s more constructive to take them into account than to act as though they don’t exist. My illness has also taught me to separate what is important from what is less important.”

**Elizabeth**

## TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST

“I worked closely with Elizabeth on a long-term project, and this shared adventure enriched my vision of leadership significantly, I’ve been able to appreciate the value of a relationship based on transparency and mutual trust. I’ve also learned that sometimes we could slow down and take breaks without its having an impact on the quality of the work.”

**Laurent**

## RESILIENCE

“In my case, burnout was a crucial stage in my life that, in the long term, was very constructive. I think that when you go back to work after being away for so long, regardless of the reasons why, you don’t have the same aspirations. It’s an opportunity to reflect on what you really want and what you can contribute to a group.”

**Fabienne**

## L’EFFICIENCE

“The same goes for me. Living with a disability has taught me the value of energy: I have very little and I know how precious it is. I now tend to favor the most efficient solutions and tools that make life easier.”

**Benoît**

## HÉLÈNE

“During my career as a researcher at Sanofi I've held several different management positions, at different levels. For 18 years, I was able to balance my personal and professional lives. Then in the space of a few months everything collapsed: the site where I worked closed, I separated from my partner and I got breast cancer. I was beset on all sides, and I had to accept help from the people around me in all humility. Thanks to their support, nine months after the diagnosis and successful treatment, I was determined to get back to my job. I wasn't aware of all the things that those nine months had changed. When I came back, I didn't recognize my environment any more, and the way other people looked at me wasn't the same, and I'd changed too. It was a new shock, which felt harder than the treatment. I wasn't prepared to face such vulnerability in my work environment. I discovered how awkward people can be when they want to do the right thing and protect others. I, who had come back to resume the course of my normal life and recreate a social bond, I found myself plunged into a deep loneliness. In spite of the time and advice that was given to me sincerely, I felt helpless and misunderstood. It's because so many of us live through this, and because we all need to work and take care of ourselves, that I embarked on the Cancer & Work: Acting Together project.”

## ISABELLE AND GÉRALDINE

Isabelle was leading a team of six in a communications department when she was struck by cancer. She went back to her job after being away for more than a year, during which time she never lost touch with her colleagues or her manager, Géraldine. It was only natural that both women joined the Cancer & Work initiative when Isabelle returned.

“When the announcement was made that she was leaving, I was shaken in my role as manager,” acknowledges Géraldine today. “It was a heavy load to bear because I was in a way the receptacle for the feelings of the whole team. It's an experience that led me to reflect on how the corporate world relates to emotions, because we actually

have everything to gain in expressing our feelings and inviting others to do the same. If we succeed, it means we build a relationship based on openness, trust and authenticity. In my opinion, this is the basis of the desire to do things together, and therefore for a different type of performance that draws on something more essential.”

Isabelle adds:

“No one is ever aware enough of the hardships that lie in store for us when we go back to work after a long-term illness — difficulties in concentration, fatigue, memory lapses... and it can last for months or even years. I was afraid that I wouldn't want to spend eight hours a day at work, and I wondered if I was still legitimate as a manager. Fortunately, I was able to share my doubts with Géraldine, which facilitated my return. Since then, I have supported two people affected by long-term illness, and the interactions I had with Géraldine are now helping me to look to the future. In hindsight, I think that accepting my vulnerability and the fact that other people embraced my vulnerability without judgment has helped make me more accepting of the difficulties of others.”

This first step taken at Sanofi shows that it is possible to create “conversation spaces”: physical or virtual spaces where vulnerable individuals, people who have been in vulnerable situations in the past and others can chat.<sup>1</sup> It is an approach that highlights the potential benefits of this type of initiative for three different groups: people who experience it as a supportive, listening and safe place to express themselves; people who encounter or work with such individuals; and those who indirectly help to handle these scenarios. As Prof. Durand notes, each of these groups can feel the strength of this “more authentic type of leadership, where people in all their facets are considered and allowed to contribute. This allows a more confident and assured fulfillment of the company's mission.” Nevertheless, the entire organization must be mobilized if this type of initiative is to be rolled out and intensified, including those involved in the decision-making, promotional and investment processes that make such initiatives possible.

1. Durand, R., & Calori, R. (2006). Sameness, otherness? Enriching organizational change theories with philosophical considerations on the same and the other. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(1), 93-114.

# VALUES, MEANING AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFICIENCY: REVEALING THE HIDDEN STRENGTHS OF VULNERABILITY

**F**or Jan, who has been involved in building the Cancer & Work: Acting Together program, this experience can pave the way for others. “In hindsight, I think that the holistic aspect of this method, which mobilizes the entire work ecosystem, has made us aware that we’re all vulnerable and that this impacts on our performance. Cancer & Work: Acting Together is seen as the proof of concept for an approach that demonstrates that humanity and performance can be allies that are as unexpected as they are effective, and all the more so in a healthcare company.”

## JAN

“I arrived at Sanofi in 2011 to head up a consumer health products brand. I came from the world of cosmetics and luxury goods, and it was a deliberate choice and a real opportunity to get into the world of health, whose values always attracted me. Afterwards, I held a number of positions inside the group, developing solutions for patients. In 2018 I had the opportunity to use the knowledge I acquired from the client/patient focus on behalf of the group’s employees. I joined the Global People & Leadership Development department to build its division dedicated to adopting HR solutions. I’m passionate about leadership issues and the human element in all its forms, and I’ve been involved in coaching and mentoring activities within the Sanofi Women’s Network for many years. It was in the context of the latter that I met H el ene as a mentee, then worked with her helping with the genesis of Cancer & Work: Acting Together program. It’s an adventure that has made me more interested in the human side of things in all its shapes and forms. I’d like the company where I work to be a place where everyone can realize their abilities and aspirations, make a contribution and be fully recognized for their achievements.”

## VALUE-CENTERED BENEFITS

“These combined experiences, like the academic work reported here, all point in the same direction,” says Prof. Durand. “Acknowledging vulnerabilities contributes to the emergence of authentic leadership and results in a range of benefits that have an impact inside the organization.”

The first of these benefits concerns the slow but positive transformation of the values that nourish exchanges between employees. As the eyewitness accounts in this article illustrate, the relationship to the vulnerable person sheds new light on many of the company’s own values (see page 9: “New sources of inspiration for authentic leadership”).

It is not just the general atmosphere within teams that is transformed. The benefits also extend to the relations the organization has with its stakeholders: better communication with partners; renewed and enriched relationships with customers; and, in the case of Sanofi, improved relationships with patients.

## ELIZABETH AND LAURENT

Elizabeth is an R&D project manager and Laurent has been her boss since taking up his position three years ago. Elizabeth has multiple sclerosis. She has been recognized as a worker with a disability since 2014 and the pace of her work has been adjusted.

“When Laurent arrived, I decided to tell him about my situation because I need a contact person internally in case of a relapse or extreme fatigue. Telling him about my illness laid the foundations for the authentic relationship we have today, and we’re moving forwards together in a climate of mutual trust. Knowing that I can ask for help, and that I will be heard, makes me feel secure.”

“For my part,” Laurent says, “contact with Elizabeth taught me to take care of other people without interfering in their lives — I let them steer their own ships. I also discovered that I could be more open with everyone. For instance, I used to forbid the use of computers during departmental meetings. But Elizabeth needs hers so she can take notes, so computers are welcome again. In the end, I realized that it didn’t alter things much. I have the impression that by learning to take Elizabeth’s needs and constraints into account, I’ve developed more transparency and authenticity.”

## MEANING AND CLARITY: A VISIBLE IMPACT ON ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

In addition to setting an example and enriching the company’s underlying values, another crucial benefit concerns the use of internal resources and the ability to innovate. Authentic, human-centered leadership, with all its strengths and vulnerabilities, is an intrinsic motivator for teams.

Recent studies<sup>1</sup> have shown that the companies that show the most concern for the vulnerabilities of their employees were aligned on their ultimate purpose, and — it follows — on supporting everyone. “The ‘purpose’ recently incorporated into last spring’s PACTE law [an action plan for business growth and transformation] describes the first principles that underpin and justify the existence of the collective group that makes up a company, whether it’s commercial or nonprofit,” Prof. Durand explains. A great deal of research focuses on the nonfinancial elements that govern the creation of organizations and whether or not they provide a source of comparative advantage. In most cases, this work shows that when sources of cooperation and mutual help are based on strong intrinsic motivation, the operational gains are highly significant.<sup>2</sup> For example, Nick Craig, co-creator with Bill George of the famous Harvard Business School course Authentic Leadership — Finding Your True North<sup>3</sup> (and subsequently the founder of the Core Leadership Institute), recalls in his latest book that finding meaning in one’s work increases the probability you will stay with your company by a factor of 2.8. It also doubles the satisfaction expressed for your work and boosts engagement by 93 percent compared to employees who do not find any specific meaning in their pro-

fessional activities. “These figures are even higher when employees clearly feel the purpose of their actions, and when this purpose has been clearly communicated to them,” Prof. Durand notes.

Other scientific studies<sup>4</sup> show that human-oriented leadership increases agility, adaptability and innovation capacity. These companies outperform counterparts that employ a conventional leadership style (by between 10 percent and 14 percent in terms of operational performance and innovation, for example).

Paying attention to yourself and others results in an increase in individual and collective commitment, a reduction in operational risks and a decrease in unnecessary costs. “Similarly, companies whose purpose is not solely financial and that have clear objectives and a clear management structure perform better [in terms of accounting performance and share price] than firms that don’t have a meaningful purpose — or have one but without a clear managerial line.”<sup>5</sup>

1. Craig N. 2018. *Leading from Purpose – Clarity and the Confidence to Act when It Matters Most*, Hachette Books.
2. Bridoux, F., Coeurderoy, R., & Durand, R. (2011). Heterogeneous motives and the collective creation of value. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(4), 711-730.
3. George B. 2007. *True North- Discover your authentic leadership*, Josey-Bass
4. Flammer, C., & Kacperczyk, A. (2015). The impact of stakeholder orientation on innovation: Evidence from a natural experiment. *Management Science*, 62(7), 1982-2001. Ortiz-de-Mandojana, N., & Bansal, P. (2016). The long-term benefits of organizational resilience through sustainable business practices. *Strategic Management Journal*, 37(8), 1615-1631
5. Gartenberg, C., Prat, A., & Serafeim, G. (2019). Corporate purpose and financial performance. *Organization Science*. 30(1), 1-18.

# HOW TO ESTABLISH A VIRTUOUS SPIRAL

**G**iven that integrating vulnerabilities with more humanity and authenticity creates a self-reinforcing cycle of escalating performance, why is it so difficult to make the move from local initiatives to a more holistic organizational transformation? The obstacles are well known: some are rooted in managerial practices inherited from a command and control style of leadership. Others are cultural, resulting in an environment where no one feels free to disclose their own vulnerabilities (which are perceived as signs of weakness) nor to express empathy towards people who are “just” co-workers (which would be seen as indiscrete). The road is therefore narrow for enabling local initiatives to be generalized across an entire company.

## CHANGING THE EVALUATION OF PERFORMANCE

The first key to facilitating this change lies in the principle that financial performance is a result and not an end in itself. It is the result of collective work within an organization, which also includes the context in which it is produced. “For me, today, the concept of performance that is simply observed and recorded is no longer enough. I would like an approach that is more open, holistic, impact-oriented and sustainable,” says Jan. “Performance rooted in reality, inseparable from its context. I’m convinced that by assessing performance with humanity, empathy and humility, the concept of disability is bound to disappear, because the standards and benchmarks will have become obsolete.”

This conviction can be embodied in the behaviors of the men and women who proclaim it loud and clear in an organization, beginning with the company’s leaders. Although this belief clearly helps to lay the foundations of a new regime of trust, any actions to the contrary that are not severely reprimanded will cause long-term damage to the chances of introducing a more human style of leadership.

## REINFORCING DIVERSITY

The positive echoes generated by integrating vulnerabilities resonate throughout a company’s corporate body. They support transformations and anticipate the expectations of the new generation. “We

went from being a family company to the CAC 40 in the space of fifteen or so years,” says Benoît. “Digitalization was very quick. Also, we’re a company where the end clients are primarily patients. Taken together, these characteristics remind us to refocus on the human element: it is the men and women working at Sanofi who are its strength. And our great diversity helps to boost this strength. Diversity in all its forms must become a key focus of our company culture.”

Sanofi has been committed to the fight against discrimination for a number of years. Yet, much work remains to be done “even on the obvious subject of gender equality,” says Corinne, who co-runs the Women’s Network for Sanofi France. “We want to achieve gender parity among our leaders by 2025. But in the field, we still see the effects of a very ‘gendered’ culture that has long constrained the ambitions of women, and which still has a profound impact on self-confidence. The Women’s Network develops daily awareness-raising initiatives as well as specific leadership programs. It helps create an ever-more-inclusive working environment for all Sanofi employees, regardless of who they are. This is our belief: by taking account of the multiplicity of challenges and everyone’s input, we’re also contributing to the performance of the company.”

“Diversity is also an important focus of discussion for the future,” says H el ene. “In fact, younger generations have very strong expectations about these issues. Young people entering the job market don’t hesitate to show their individuality, since it is part of who they are. Yes, they are diabetic, yes, they are in wheelchairs, yes, they are autistic or have Asperger’s. They expect companies to accept them in their entirety, in their individuality, in their frailties. They’re showing us the way. It’s up to us now to follow them.”

## DEVELOPING AN AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP CULTURE

“Authenticity is still a provocative topic in the corporate world in an age of all-powerful marketing and personal branding,” says Jan. “I think, though, that it’s a powerful motivation for sustainable

performance and for individual fulfillment. But authenticity doesn't just happen like that, any more than it is embodied in single individuals isolated from their context. It plays out in the relations that members of a social group forge: participants in this relationship each have their own keys, but if they don't use them, then things don't work. These keys mean listening, speaking freely and taking into account every aspect of the human being at work."

The example of other companies has shown that it may take several years of daily work for authentic leadership to be instituted and to have a positive impact on the professional and personal development of employees. "The approach that Best Buy in the United States has just implemented has shown that factoring in an individual's difficulties and vulnerabilities — in a distribution sector where employee turnover is very high — can be enough to create a climate of trust that can transform a troubled company into a resounding success," points out Prof. Durand. "But Best Buy's seven-year adventure also reveals something else that is important: developing this type of leadership culture is a long-term project."

The resources needed for such a transformation are specific to each company. The range of possibilities is immense, including new communication styles for demanding new commitments; technical resources devoted to spaces for conversation and exchange; training and coaching programs for managers and leaders; and "learning expeditions" — not to mention developing reward/sanction systems centering on leadership practices. Above all, it is essential that the path ahead is clearly signposted.

“Disabilities, illnesses and fragilities of any kind should no longer be relegated to a parallel universe. They should be fully recognized as strengths and resources we can use to build our collective performance. It's up to each of us to play a role, to change the way we look at vulnerabilities day by day: companies — places where people come together to act and collaborate — are the ideal terrain for making a lasting difference.”

**Guillaume Leroy**

#### **Academic sources other than those mentioned in the footnotes:**

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- Flammer, C., & Bansal, P. (2017). Does a long-term orientation create value? Evidence from a regression discontinuity. *Strategic Management Journal*, 38(9), 1827-1847

#### **Further reading:**

- [www.ecoreseau.fr/rh-et-formation/recrutement-emploi/2018/06/07/handicap-travail-le-management-inclusif-comme-levier-de-performance/](http://www.ecoreseau.fr/rh-et-formation/recrutement-emploi/2018/06/07/handicap-travail-le-management-inclusif-comme-levier-de-performance/)
- [www.playitagain.fr/handicap-en-entreprise-par-fabrice-agret/](http://www.playitagain.fr/handicap-en-entreprise-par-fabrice-agret/)
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