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BECOMING AGILE

How the SEAM Approach to Management Builds Adaptability

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The main challenge companies will face in the future is an issue of great importance to me. It is also a priority for Brioche Pasquier’s human resource development strategy: the balance paradigm. Balance results from a reasoned consideration of the external environment versus the internal environment. The external environment demands immediacy, hyper-specialization, and a technical approach to the fields of sales management, finance, production, and other functions, but it also discourages a more holistic approach that would pay significant attention to the people in the company. To enable such a balance in organizational practices, one between the external and the internal environments, leaders must formalize a strategy, write it down, and translate it into company projects that match and reflect their being and will and draw on the company’s basic management principles. Such formality helps to avoid unwarranted turnarounds that might result from unstable, turbulent, and short-term business pressures. Indeed, our aim is to sustain our strategic view over the long run.

Teamwork is the key to enabling this holistic and balanced approach. It preserves everyone’s functional skills and areas of
expertise. Indeed, the external pressure for hyper-specialization results in a workforce more interested in achieving personal goals and furthering their own skills and expertise at the expense of the organization’s purpose. Teamwork balances this natural pressure.

Because we run a family business, we profit from our sustainability and continuity at the managerial level—and even more in regard to ownership. Our primary goal is long-term effectiveness; it is not to cope with immediacy and exogenous disruptions stemming from the external environment. Again, balancing requires fine-tuning between long-term sustainability and short-term reactions to avoid being deaf and blind to the external environment.

I’m also convinced that we have to draw on a “glocal” paradigm—thinking both globally and locally. In fact, globalization and a regional focus are not a contradiction at all. The ability to balance global and local issues is as important to tomorrow’s success as the balancing of external and internal demands. Even global aspirations require local actions to take into account strategic domains, our customers and consumers, our partners, and our suppliers so that our teams can operate successfully.

The Brioche Pasquier Group chose the socio-economic approach to management (SEAM) in 1984 because our objective, since our founding in 1974, has been to remain focused on our village while also being open to the outside. Little did we know at the time, but we had already figured out how to scale the company through a “glocal” approach. From the beginning, we wanted to become a national player, but above all, to produce as close as possible to the consumers and reinforce the closeness between managers and employees within the
company. Partnering with ISEOR has helped us implement and formalize organizational structures, to spread the SEAM process throughout the company. Thinking about it and being convinced of its accuracy were not sufficient. In-depth implementation was also key.

The SEAM approach taught us that a step-by-step strategy, rather than an urgent and furious one, enabled more effective, ultimately faster, and more differentiated growth and internationalization. This capability forced us to distinguish between clear objectives and the careful planning of cooperative implementation activities that best addressed the necessary changes. Such an approach and process facilitated our change management strategy, contributed to our agility, and resulted in a genuine Brioche Pasquier DNA or identity.

The socio-economic management tools that we have been practicing for more than thirty years have supported a disciplined and sustained implementation of our management principles. SEAM demands discipline and sustainable, integrated work, not “one shot” practices. The periodically negotiable activity contracts, which we call CAPs in the company (Contrats d’Amélioration Pasquier), go beyond the usual quantitative objectives, such as meeting budget, raising market share, reducing waste, or increasing productivity. In each and every CAP, managers propose quantified and tangible objectives as well as intangible objectives, such as the creation of potential. The latter are as important as the former: they consist of objectives that mentor new employees, clarify dysfunctions observed by teams in the factories, or encourage employees to improve their professional skills and teamwork on various projects. For me, those CAP objectives are the real lever to achieve the objectives of economic performance and the traditional quantified
objectives. Indeed, one cannot become a production director or a sales director within a few months. It takes several semesters of hard work.

A final point about the SEAM approach is that it connects and integrates management tools together; independent, stand-alone management tools are inefficient. Articulating business plans, CAPs, and piloting logbooks really create added value that steer the company. At the Brioche Pasquier Group, we don’t separate the business plan, human resource development, product development, and technical three-year projections from the six-month CAP processes that generate actions to be achieved and managerial meetings to set up. Misinterpreting such an understanding and integration would result in stacking up multiple layers of management tools and structures that would not make sense.

The book submitted by Chris Worley, Véronique Zardet, Marc Bonnet, and Amandine Savall holds up a mirror to our company. The daily immersion in the strategic piloting of a company can result in forgetting its strong points and weaknesses. When I received the manuscript, I asked a recently recruited, young, English-speaking employee to read it. She told me that the history, the strategy, and the functioning of Brioche Pasquier Group, as presented in the book, clearly reflect the current situation of the company, while shedding light on the understanding of the origins of our values and management principles.

The agility concept proposed in the book sounds relevant to me, because it shows the company’s strategic journey, including the challenges we faced in Italy and Spain, and in the creation of the Pastry business unit. It also demonstrates the contribution of the analysis of dysfunctions and the work
we did to learn from these challenges. The distinctive added value of the book is that it brings to light the power of SEAM. I’m much more aware of this phenomenon than ten or twenty years ago, because this methodology enhances a company’s agility, as we could experience it at the Brioche Pasquier Group.

Pascal Pasquier, CEO
Brioche Pasquier Group
Preface

The book in your hand, Becoming Agile, is the third in a trilogy dedicated to helping executives and change practitioners understand the elements and dynamics of organization agility. Assessing Organization Agility summarized our perspective on agility and provided a simple but powerful tool for diagnosing a system’s agile routines. In The Agility Factor, we described the agility framework. The Agility Pyramid was the result of a seven-year research program, and the book provided a variety of cases that demonstrated this dynamic capability.

This book illustrates how organization agility can be implemented using the socio-economic approach to management (SEAM) developed by the researchers at the Institute for Socio-Economic Organization Research (ISEOR). The case study presented in this book compares the principles of organization agility developed at the University of Southern California’s Center for Effective Organizations with a long-term experiment supervised by Henri Savall over the past three decades. Such a long period of intervention-research in the same company beats the previous record for longitudinal participative observation held by Eliott Jaques and the Glacier Metal Company.
Henri Savall created the SEAM approach in 1973 and founded the ISEOR research center in 1975 to create a body of intervention-based knowledge using what he called the “qualimetrics research method.” It is an approach aimed at observing the complexity of organization life through a variety of transformation processes. For more than forty years, Henri has trained more than 600 researchers at the ISEOR research center through intervention-research projects he conducted himself and supervised in numerous companies and organizations (1,850 so far). His ongoing and renewable energy to develop an organization’s agility, as well as to manage junior and senior researchers at ISEOR, who strived to create and publish genuine, actionable, and innovative management knowledge that affect company practices, is rare.

Since 1984, the ISEOR team has experienced an outstanding partnership with the Brioche Pasquier Group and its top leaders. They have an exceptional and bold strategic vision of their family business, as well as the skills to adapt the SEAM approach to their company’s setting. This publication would not have existed without Henri Savall and the Brioche Pasquier group.
Acknowledgments

Bringing this book to market has been a central endeavor of a number of colleagues and supporters who deserve recognition.

Chris’ colleagues at the Center for Effective Organizations, Ed Lawler, Sue Mohrman, Gerry Ledford, John Boudreau, Alec Levenson, and Theresa Welbourne, have each contributed to this work. Ed and Sue, in particular, have been constant companions, critics, and cheerleaders; they have pushed me to think hard about how to keep this work rigorous and relevant. Alice Mark, Aaron Griffiths, and the CEO staff have also made my work meaningful with their efficient, high-quality support and their positive, energetic personalities. Everyone should be blessed with such a support network.

I’ve also been blessed with a thought partner who thinks hard and clear, develops insights with discipline, and brings deep experience to the work. I met Tom Williams through Jim O’Toole and Steve Wheeler, and much of this program’s success is because of Tom’s devotion and contribution.

As always, my family is forever. Anybody who knows me knows I am mad in love with my wife, Debbie, and our “kids,” Sarah, Hannah, and Sam. For those of you who don’t know me,
if I’m any good at all at the things I do, it’s because of my family. The best decision I’ve ever made was more than thirty-two years ago when I said “yes” to a relationship with Debbie. Since then, through the ups and downs of family life, my amazement at her capacity for caring, support, tolerance, and unconditional love for “a wretch like me” has grown. Deb and I are blessed to have raised three college graduates of enormous potential, and we are excited to see what paths they will choose for themselves. For now, I’m just grateful for their love and support as Dad “does his thing.” To the four of you, all my love, always.

In this book, a group of long-time colleagues were able to join the research program. Through my work at Pepperdine University, the Center for Effective Organizations, and now at the NEOMA business school, I have had the privilege of working with and learning about the research at ISEOR. During my sabbatical year in Lyon, France, conversations with Marc Bonnet about organization agility and ISEOR’s work with Brioche Pasquier led to visits to the organization and eventually to a decision to write this book. I am grateful to Marc (and his wife, Françoise) for making Debbie and me feel welcome in their beautiful city. Marc and Véronique Zardet made the insightful suggestion to bring Amandine Savall aboard. Amandine’s doctoral dissertation into the globalization of Brioche Pasquier added critical and complementary nuance to the story.

First and foremost, Véronique thanks Henri Savall and all the ISEOR team members who have supported and facilitated this book, in particular our colleagues, Olivier Voyant, professor of management at IAE Lyon, and Frantz Datry, who are both intervention-research project leaders at ISEOR. She would also like to extend a special thank you to Serge and Louis-Marie Pasquier, the company leaders in 1984, and to
Pascal, who has been CEO since 2007. He is steering an ambitious internationalization strategy through managerial agility.

Many thanks to Chris Worley, who proposed challenging and stimulating interactions that enabled the publication of this book; Marc and Amandine, who supported Véronique in this fabulous project. It was a six-month team experience that supplemented all of the team’s skills and backgrounds. Indeed, it was a truly international process!

This book wouldn’t exist without the opportunity afforded by meeting with our North American colleagues, who became friends and have strongly supported ISEOR since 1998. They have facilitated its publications and the dissemination of SEAM in North America: thank you to David Boje and Grace Anne Rosile, Anthony Buono, Peter Sorensen and Therese Yaeger, Murray Lindsay, Robert Gephart, John Conbere and Alla Heoriadi, not to mention all those we have met since then.

Véronique thanks her family, her parents, and her daughters and their husbands as well as the grandchildren who have supported her for more than thirty years, particularly during the tense moments focused on preparing a book to be released.

For Marc, this book is a tribute to those who proved to be agile and tenacious enough to spur innovation in the field of management science. Indeed, Henri Savall supervised this intervention-research project for over three decades, a research process that is unique in our field. From the very beginning, Brioche Pasquier’s leaders have been daring and have embedded the values of human potential development in a structured way through ISEOR’s socio-economic approach to management (SEAM). Together, the leaders, company managers, and employees are the very embodiment of managerial nimbleness.