





**OPTIMISM & BUSINESS
FOR A STRATEGIC AND INNOVATIVE APPROACH
TO COMMITMENT AND PERFORMANCE**

Optimism & Business

For a strategic and innovative approach
to commitment and performance

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PRELIMINARIES

In a volatile period, shaken by multiple crises and where the future seems uncertain or even threatening, the ability of organizations to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude is essential for the survival of the company as well as for the physical and mental health of its employees.

For several years optimism has been studied in many fields of scientific research. In business too, the subject is examined and a strategic approach to optimism is adopted in order to create the conditions for its emergence, maintenance and development.

For Altrad, the objective is threefold and of primary importance: (i) to release the energy and commitment necessary for action, (ii) to contribute to the well-being of each individual and (iii) to contribute to the performance and sustainability of the organization as a whole.

This document explores the notion of optimism, in order to better understand its characteristics and the conditions under which it manifests. In particular, it highlights the fundamental role of the founder, leaders and teams in bringing optimism to the workplace. It invites each of us to reflect on our personal position on the pessimism-optimism continuum. Collectively, it invites us to reflect on how to create a human and ambitious workspace that combines performance and well-being.



INTRODUCTION

*Pessimism is about mood;
optimism is about will.*
ÉMILE-AUGUSTE CHARTIER,
known as ALAIN

“All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” Voltaire’s words, spoken by his hero Candide, still ring in our ears and obscure the meaning we attach – sometimes, often – to the notion of optimism.

Optimism could be seen as the tendency of some people to see the world through rose-tinted glasses, distorting reality, and leading them to believe in the promise of a brighter future. But what is it really?

For several years now, optimism has been a topic of study in many fields of scientific research including educational science, management, psychology, health, sociology, anthropology and economics.

Following the example of researchers, major consultancy firms are investigating the concept of optimism and attempting to measure it. In a recent report, Bruno Bousquié of Ernst & Young compared the optimism of French managers with that of their foreign counterparts after two years of Covid-19: “Whether in regard to the consequences of the pandemic, investments abroad, investor support, environmental commitment, growth prospects and the dynamics of mergers and acquisitions, French executives are more optimistic and dynamic than their average counterparts in the rest of the world.”¹

After two years of intense upheaval, it does seem important to take the pulse of businesses and leaders and to gauge and share how confident they feel about the future. This may be because, intuitively, we feel that optimism, like pessimism, might well be contagious.

In a period shaken by multiple crises related to the economy, health, energy, democracy, geopolitics, ecology – and where the future seems increasingly uncertain and threatening – it may seem incongruous to talk about optimism and confidence. And yet it is necessary to do so.

1. Bruno Bousquié, “Les dirigeants français plus optimistes que leurs homologues du reste du monde?”, Ernst & Young, 9 February 2022.

Why is it relevant to assess the level of confidence? Can we isolate the causes, produce explanations to shed light on the phenomenon of “optimism”, and create the conditions for its emergence and deployment?

To what extent is the issue of optimism interesting to the world of organizations? Why is it important for the Altrad Group?

Over the last few years we have repeatedly reflected on the crucial role of trust in the Group’s sustainability and the commitment of all to our *raison d’être*. Indeed, the entire logic of organizational development and relationships is based on trust. Our exchanges, whether friendly, romantic, professional, economic, financial or related to life in general, are largely influenced by the underlying and resulting levels of trust.

As human beings, endowed with the capacity to think and reflect, we constantly project ourselves into the future. This ability to anticipate is not only based on rationale and fact, but also has an emotional dimension.

In short, if we don’t believe in the future, the need to anticipate it is pointless. Doesn’t believing that a future is possible underly our tendency to hope? Hope is sustained by a degree of optimism and confidence, which in some ways merge.

Can optimism (and its corollaries, happiness and confidence) be analysed, or even generated, for the greater good of our business and its stakeholders? Is optimism individual or relational?

Why, in a challenging or even desperate situation, do some of us give up the fight (even if it means dying) while others never give up and continue to hope? Is it possible to influence a state of mind and to what extent? Can we really educate for optimism?

Does the current context make optimism more essential than ever? To what end? What are the risks to our company if pessimism and defeatism become widespread?

How can the development of a culture of optimism within Altrad enable us to be better aligned with our vision and honour our mission? Is this a determining factor that deserves attention?

Does the injunction to be happy and optimistic have negative effects? Are there any limits to the “manufacture” of optimism?

These are the questions – which guide the research that follows – that we would like to invite all our employees and leaders to reflect on at our next seminar in April 2023.

Our reflection, while distinguishing between the concepts of optimism, confidence and happiness or well-being, explores each of these concepts in turn. It also deals with their opposites – pessimism, defeatism and unhappiness – because intuitively, they all seem to be linked. The ambition is certainly not to pretend to eliminate the latter to benefit the former, but to find a favourable balance.

We will attempt to define optimism, to identify its importance for the vitality and future of Altrad. We’ll try to understand the role optimism plays in the performance and growth of our activities, and identify the means to create, support and maintain it.

We’ll also seek to identify the particular role that leaders, whoever they may be, play in the fostering of trust and confidence, starting with the Group’s founder.

We’ll share our ideas on the possible virtuous circle that optimism feeds into, and on what we can do to maintain, or even amplify it, but also on the pitfalls that we need to be aware of in order to better avoid them.

Our aim this year is to explore a strategic and innovative approach to engagement and performance: optimism.

OPTIMISM & BUSINESS



DISCUSSION POINTS

WHAT IS OPTIMISM?

According to the Robert dictionary, optimism is both (i) a “Doctrine according to which the world is the best and happiest it can be”, (ii) a “Mindset disposed to seeing things from the good side, neglecting their disagreeable aspect” and (iii) an “Impression, (a) feeling of happy confidence in the outcome, the favourable conclusion of a particular situation”.

So optimism can be viewed from (at least) three different angles:

- that of doctrine, in other words, of a set of beliefs and principles which constitute a system of teaching and/or aggregate into an opinion, a thesis, on a given issue;
- that of a mindset, that is, a psychological predisposition or structure by virtue of which an individual would tend to view the world, others and/or oneself in a positive light;
- that of a feeling of confidence, that is, a physical feeling (calmness) coupled with a conviction (serenity) that what is problematic or difficult today will be resolved tomorrow.

Optimism can be described for its own sake (an ontological definition, as it were), but it can also be defined by its likely effects, what it allows and its specificities.

It can also be linked to related notions such as idealism, utopia and hope, but also, on a more critical side, to angelism, naivety, or even willful blindness or denial.

What exactly is optimism? Has positive thinking always prevailed? Have individual happiness and collective well-being long been at the heart of our concerns? What does our relationship with these interrelated notions of optimism and happiness, progress and performance, say about our world and ourselves?

Our society, which in many respects is characterized as individualistic, is perhaps the first to consider that each individual is the repository of inner resources and can therefore forge his or her own happiness. Happiness is therefore not exogenous – that is, it comes from outside (God, fate, society, etc.) – but endogenous, that is, it comes from within and is a choice.

Is personal development, a new trend in how to think promoted by coaches such as Tony Robbins, intended to lead us to happiness, a sign of a society that is freeing itself

from the shackles of pessimism or of a society in which optimism is becoming a form of servitude?

The science of happiness is a “new” field of academic research, based in particular on the optimistic thinking developed by certain philosophers and on the trend of positive psychology.

In a few words, what are we talking about?

Philosophical approaches to optimism

It would be impossible to give an exhaustive account of the philosophers who have reflected on optimism, happiness, pessimism and suffering. At some time, all of them have done it! As a result, we will cite a limited number of references.

“What we need to know is how we should live our lives to make them the best they can be.” Since Socrates, the representation of optimism refers to a state of mind, a positive way of perceiving the world and the course of life, a perception that acts as a driver and creates the conditions for initiative and action.

With the Iliad, and before the Odyssey, the power to act was on the side of the gods. Odysseus, as an individual, acquires the power to influence his fate and the ability to shape his life. The ancient tragedians also mention this individual ability to influence and impact, which can be found in Christian philosophy. A person can save their soul and open the gates of heaven through their own actions.

Nevertheless, “optimistic” philosophers are probably (far) less numerous than their “pessimistic” peers. From Socrates to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, via Auguste Comte, they outline an existence that can be improved, a utopian objective and a belief in progress.

For Socrates people are free to make their own choices. It is therefore important to enlighten them with truth and knowledge, as evil is always a question of ignorance and not of will (or lack thereof).

According to this optimistic view of human beings, who believe in their potential, it is possible to rise through education and make “good” choices. Belief in the ability to express potential – under certain conditions of work and knowledge development in particular – contains hope, that is, the space of confidence in the possibility of progress and improvement; this is optimism.

For René Descartes (1596–1650), freedom is a presupposition. People possess free will (“the decree of the spirit”), fundamentally linked to the distinction between body and mind, which is a capacity to choose. It is the role of our will to determine itself independently of external influences. Will is therefore independent of matter. For freedom to exist, the mind must be able to determine itself independently of the body. The potential capacity to act is considerable.

The philosophical system devised by Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) is one of totality. His ambition was to explain God and nature (that is, the totality of what is, terms which, for him, are confused). For Spinoza, freedom is an illusion. His monism is a direct obstacle to the notion of free will. An individual, both a physical being and a spiritual being (that is, endowed with a conscience), thinks that they are the author of their acts, the free decision-maker of their actions. Are we really the authors of our actions? Are we really responsible for what we think and what we do? For him, our acts are only the mechanical consequence of our ideas, and vice versa.

The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), considered one of the founders of the doctrine of optimism, explains the existence of evil on earth by humanity's violation of an initial state of harmony, an expression of divine perfection and goodness. Humans, who cannot equal God, but who nevertheless benefit from His mercy, do their best in the best of all possible worlds. This is the basis of his philosophy, which Voltaire criticizes in his *Candide: Optimism*.

The work of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is based on a belief in human freedom and goodness. For him God is the ultimate degree of perfection. However, the best of all worlds is not an illusory concept, but a determinate one. Among all possible worlds, there is one world that receives the ultimate degree of perfection. If people are not free but governed by the determinism of nature, then they cannot be responsible for their actions. However, Kant does not refute the existence of freedom, which exists “in itself”, that is, outside of sensibility (the way we perceive the world) which acts as a filter. Thus people are affected by their sensibility, which provides them with experience, driving them to act.

With Auguste Comte (1798–1857), we speak rather of utopia. As Laurent Fedi reminds us, Comte “constructs a unified vision of human history leading to a final state considered as definitive. To achieve this, he mobilizes several registers, some of which may appear to be mutually contradictory: scientific engineering applied to social science, the secular transposition of the Christian theme of the imminent coming of the Kingdom, the utopian genre and even anticipation literature.”²

For Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), who wanted to be Plato's “disciple”, no happiness was possible. Life is an infinite succession of sufferings; it is not worth living as it is only the result of a radical absurdity. “Thus, our whole life swings like a pendulum, from right to left, from suffering to boredom.” Suffering because I do not have what I desire; boredom because I have what I no longer desire.

Compared to optimism, utopia, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, is an “imaginary place or state of things where everything is perfect”. It is also a project whose realization is impossible, an imaginary conception and as such cannot exist in reality.

Paradoxically, we could therefore argue that utopia cannot be confused with optimism, since the better future and increased happiness it envisages are impossible or unattainable, despite scientific discoveries.

From a more metaphysical point of view, “optimism and pessimism are usually seen as psychological attitudes or metaphysical systems. However, attitudes are affected by individual character, and the genesis of metaphysical systems can often be explained by historical evolution. We therefore have to look at how optimism and pessimism become morals, presenting an ethical vision of the world, and defining the table of values ... If we consider that these attitudes (optimistic and pessimistic) are not constitutive, but historically acquired, we can then consider the genesis of these attitudes. However, it seems that a natural element is at the root of both attitudes. Metaphysically: optimism is a doctrine according to which the total amount of evil (metaphysical, moral and physical) decreases in the universe as time passes. Time works for humanity. There is progress.

2. Laurent Fedi, “Auguste Comte et l'avenir. Enquête sur les fondements de la futurologie positiviste”, *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 105, no. 2 (2021): pp. 209–229.

Pessimism, on the other hand, asserts that the passage of time brings an increase in the amount of evil in the universe: time works against humanity.”³

Historical approaches to optimism

*How happy is a life that begins
with love and ends with ambition!
If I had to choose, this is the one I should take.*
PASCAL⁴

The history of optimism merges, in a way, with the understanding of happiness over the centuries.

- In Christian culture, happiness is a paradise lost after original sin. The earthly experience is a vocation to be endured in the hope of eventual bliss, in order to earn the right to eternal happiness in the hereafter.
- In Buddhist culture, happiness can be attained in our lifetime through the regular and rigorous practice of mindfulness and connection to the present moment.
- Epicureanism, on the other hand, allows us to achieve overall satisfaction through the reasoned use of life’s natural pleasures. Like Stoicism, a philosophy of personal ethics according to which happiness consists of accepting the moment as it presents itself and freeing oneself from the potential control that could be exercised by the desire for pleasure and the fear of pain and suffering, Epicureanism suggests an incompatibility between happiness and work.
- Hedonism, which is based on the pursuit of intense and ephemeral pleasures, adds to these earthly pleasures that of sexuality, which is at the heart of its philosophy.
- Monism, which claims the indivisible unity of being, associates happiness with the discovery of the profound meaning of life.
- Sadism, on the other hand, is based on the pleasure derived from the suffering of others, while masochism describes the behaviour of a person who finds pleasure in suffering.
- Finally, in terms of consumerism, satisfaction is achieved through the endless acquisition of material goods.

“When history is based on the power of action of individuals, humanity progresses,” says the psychologist Martin Seligman, and “when people no longer believe in their power to act, stagnation occurs.”

With the advent of the Enlightenment, the paradigm of modernity became one of optimism and progress. The focus shifted to human abilities in general. The philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were concerned with enabling people to gain access to knowledge, freedom and happiness.

Confidence in humanity’s ability to deepen its knowledge, to perfect itself (today we would say to develop or grow) and to build its own happiness was brilliantly illustrated by the state of mind that prevailed among the American pioneers – the White

3. Gilbert Simondon, “Optimisme et pessimisme”, in *Sur la philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 2016), pp. 109–115.

4. Blaise Pascal, *Discourse on the Passion of Love*, trans. O. W. Wright (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–1914), p. 5.

Anglo-Saxon Protestants – who set out to conquer their freedom and happiness in a new land – America – the promise of all possibilities, and were driven by their optimism, their will and their efforts.

The twentieth century and the tragedies that have traversed it have undermined this vision of continuous progress and of humanity's ultimate attainment of its optimal state. Indeed, in a world beset by rapid and unceasing changes that have upset traditional and natural balances, the concept of optimism has gradually dissolved. Pessimism, doom and gloom, defeatism and apocalyptic projections of the future infiltrate minds, media and culture.

“Since the twentieth century, we have returned to the myth of progress and its eschatological dimension, but at the cost of disillusionment and a loss of collective meaning, and even of a catastrophism that resurrects old apocalyptic terrors,” according to the philosopher Laurent Fedi.⁵

At the same time, the development of individualism, at the heart of Western societies, shifts the focus of attention to the individual, to their destiny and personal capacity to achieve happiness. Ultimately, “it is thanks to happiness that we can bear adversity, difficulty, the fact that we are going to die, the fact that the people we love are going to die too”, says psychiatrist and psychotherapist Christophe André.

“We are probably the first society or societies to pay such attention to the individual as a repository of inner resources”, explains sociologist Nicolas Marquis, which no doubt is the reason for the extraordinary rise in personal development and methods for developing our positivity.

Optimism, positivism ... soil to be nurtured to allow the individual to face adversity and reach their full potential. The underlying idea is that it is possible to teach “optimism” and reproduce the conditions of optimism in “pessimists”.

Psychological approaches to optimism

Optimism and pessimism are often commonly understood as psychological attitudes or data, or even character traits.

According to Gilbert Simondon, “the optimist corresponds to a dilated body type; the pessimist, on the contrary, is of a retracted type. The former experiences enjoyment in wider communication with the outside world; the latter seeks self-preservation from the world's attacks, closing off from the outside world. It is possible to accept that these attitudes are not constitutive, but historically acquired, and we can then establish the genesis of these attitudes. However, a natural element appears to lie at the root of both attitudes.”⁶

For Sigmund Freud and his followers, for many years the “sciences of the psyche” and research in psychology tended to focus on the problems of individuals, what is going wrong, what is hurting, what prevents them from recovering and from doing well. It was a question of accessing, through hypnosis techniques, dream interpretation and analysis sessions, the patient's unconscious in order to better heal their repressed childhood traumas.

5. Fedi, “Auguste Comte et l'avenir”, *Enquête sur les fondements de la futurologie positiviste*, *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 105, no. 2 (2021): pp. 209–229.

6. Simondon, “Optimisme et pessimisme”, pp. 109–115.

Thus, like the pessimists, psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis focused mainly on a dark vision of the human soul and on the negative aspects of existence: errors, defects, setbacks, problems, stress, mental illnesses, neuroses, psychoses, deviances, unhappiness and so on, developing a conception of the human being tinged with pessimism. Moreover, did not Schopenhauer, like Freud, say that the best we can hope for in life is not to be unhappy?

Breaking with this pessimistic vision of the human soul, and seeking to understand what makes people happy, the psychologist Martin Seligman – despite being a world specialist in depression – chose to study the positive sides of life. With his positive approach, conceptualized and developed in the United States in the late 1990s, Seligman overturned the existing doctrine and paved the way for a new current of thought: positive psychology. Breaking with Freudian tradition – according to which childhood traumas and their repetition throughout our lives form the basis of our failures and psychological suffering – positive psychology has become established in Europe, particularly in business management.

Seeking to go beyond a mechanical approach to living beings, Seligman tries to understand how our psyche influences our attitude to life. He states:

- a pessimist is someone who, when something bad happens to them, believes three things: (1) it's permanent, it will last forever; (2) it's contagious, it will undermine everything I do; (3) it's uncontrollable, I can't do anything about it;
- an optimist, when something bad happens to them, thinks: (1) it's temporary, (2) it's just about this situation and (3) I can fix it.

The apparent tautology that Seligman arrives at is that when faced with a difficult situation, individuals who do not get depressed are optimists. Moreover, he argues that in mammals, including humans, optimism is a quality that can be learned, developed and taught.

In addition to accessing happiness, optimism is synonymous with the “power to act”.

The cognitive structure of humans provides hope, Seligman argues. It is possible to act and learn to be happy, to believe in a favourable future and create the conditions for it. In this context, positive psychology's “mission” is to create the tools and strategies to enable us to develop optimism in order to (i) (re)connect with our will, our resources and (ii) give us back our capacity for action.

OPTIMISM AND BUSINESS

Happiness and work, optimism and business ... are they oxymorons or, on the contrary, as Marie-Pierre Feuvrier suggests, strategic management paths for the company?⁷

As a preliminary remark, let us mention here some pointers to the singular relationship between the business world and the concept of optimism.

7. Marie-Pierre Feuvrier, “Bonheur et travail, oxymore ou piste de management stratégique de l'entreprise?”, *Management Prospective* Ed., 2, no. 68 (2014): 164–182.

Etymologically, the word for work in French, *travail* – from the Latin *tripaliare*, “to torment, to torture with the *trepalium*”⁸ – does not suggest an obvious relationship between work and pleasure, enterprise and happiness. It was not until the eighteenth century that the idea of happiness and work were associated.⁹

With the industrial era and the development of capitalism, work constitutes the means for individuals to provide for their vital needs and to exist via the status conferred by their professional situation.¹⁰ If for these authors, happiness is “an intimate feeling, shaped by social norms”, work is one of those great social facts that “set in motion the totality of society and its institutions”. The time devoted to it daily is considerable; it is a factor of identification and participates in the “instituted social divisions”; the company is a place of confrontation of social groups. Simply put, “work is more than work”.¹¹ Taylorism and the scientific organization of work that it implies having shown their limits, the corporate world is seeking a new paradigm. The re-evaluation of tasks and the recognition of the importance of quality human relations do not, however, succeed in curbing the prevalence of a certain malaise at work, against a backdrop of performance requirements that must always be surpassed and skills that must always be reinforced.

The economic context marked by successive crises, increased competition in a context of globalization, and the measurement of value based almost exclusively on profit, combined with the growing societal demand for happiness, all contribute to creating harmful work environments that are out of step with the aspirations of individuals. This dissonance creates suffering.

Media coverage of tragic events within companies, the societal cost of work stoppages, and the rise of physical and mental illnesses linked to stress are gradually leading public authorities to tackle the subject of suffering at work. In France, and elsewhere in Europe, companies are required to take into account the well-being and mental health of employees.

In addition, in several parts of the world, the GDP is being questioned as the sole indicator of economic performance and social progress. Created at the initiative of the French government in 2008, the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission raised questions that are increasingly being asked about the relevance of current measures of economic performance, particularly those based on GDP.

The commission has been asked to reflect on a more appropriate and representative measure of social well-being, sustainable development and wealth creation, that is, the three pillars of social, ecological and economic performance. It proposes happiness as one of the avenues to consider.

For the past few decades, managerial literature has been full of references to optimism, happiness and well-being. As mentioned, recent research on happiness by the positive psychology movement establishes a correlation, and even a causal link, between happiness and economic performance: happier employees perform better.

8. Alain Rey, *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, vol. 3 (Paris: Robert, 2012), p. 3735).

9. Christian Baudelot and Michel Gollac, *Travailler pour être heureux ? Le bonheur et le travail en France* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

“Positive Psychology is the scientific study of optimal human functioning. It aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive. .”¹²In a paper written in 1999 Seligman explains his ambition, which goes beyond the development of tools for being happy. It is about making positive psychology a current of thought in the social sciences related to economics, sociology and politics.

Interestingly, the first supporters of the development of positive psychology – outside the academic field – were business leaders, such as John Templeton (banker and fund manager) and Charles Feeney (founder of the Duty Free Shoppers Group). These entrepreneurs “value willingness and leadership”.¹³The Clifton Strengths Test, developed by the academic Donald Clifton and inspired by the work of Seligman, was marketed by the Gallup management research and consultancy firm and subsequently adopted by almost all members of Fortune 500, as a formidable opportunity to increase their performance.



Clifton’s approach is based on the idea that the experience of happiness follows the path of inner resources that should be recognized, developed and deployed.

This is the basis of self-help, which emerged in the United States in the nineteenth century and which gained traction between the two world wars. For the Protestant migrants who came to seek their fortune and freedom in America, the land of possibilities, wealth could be conquered through work and willpower, also allowing each individual to achieve self-fulfilment.

12. Martin Seligman, “Positive Psychology Network Concept Paper 1999”. The paper is available online.
 13. *Le business du bonheur*, 88 min., dir. Jean-Christophe Ribot, Arte, 2022.

In a Calvinist worldview, it is a question of fulfilling the will of a God who values effort and commitment. It is therefore up to each individual to build their own happiness. Happiness is possible. It is reasonable to be optimistic, since hard work and virtue will be rewarded.

The Great Depression, which plunged millions of people into misery, did not seem to shake American optimism. The future was uncertain. But their abiding faith in the power of will did not waver.

After the Second World War, and especially in the latter part of the twentieth century, intellectuals, authors and researchers intensified their studies and published their conclusions, which companies seized upon in order to optimize performance and success.

Everyone is urged to take their own destiny in hand. Underlying this is the “implicit” belief that everyone is responsible not only for their own successes, but also for their own failures. In this cultural and economic context, happiness is seen as an individual rather than a collective matter.

In many studies, optimism – the belief in the possibility of a favourable outcome – is considered to be the defining variable in the ability of a person and their family to escape poverty or their initial condition and to achieve wealth and comfort.

The sociologist Eva Illouz reminds us that “one of the great imaginings of American culture is that the resources are there; they are there for anyone who is virtuous enough and hard-working enough to seize them”.¹⁴ The myth of the self-made person, a model that is deeply rooted in the American collective unconscious, maintains the valorization of an individualistic system whereby it is up to each individual to build their own success.

Both fictional and managerial literature foster this myth, sometimes overlooking the role of the cultural, socio-economic and personal contexts of the individual, and the unequal and finite distribution of existing or created wealth imposed by the limitation of resources.

It also assumes that there is an almost perfect (and automatic) correlation between reward and merit. Is this so obvious?

“Behind the democratic notion that everyone has access to their inner resources, there is a form of meritocracy that can take hold”, says Nicolas Marquis. This meritocracy “says something violent ... if everyone has the resources, the fact that some manage to overcome problems while others do not is their individual responsibility”.

In other words, if you are poor, it is because you chose to be poor. The same applies if you are rich. In this sense, the influence of one’s particular life circumstances might appear secondary to individual effort, will and talent.

Understandably, this way of seeing the world – “if you want to, you can” – has been widely deployed within organizations, which consider it a prime motivational lever. Power to act and performance go hand in hand. The more pessimistic an individual, the more an organization doubts their future, the more they lose their ability to act and the more their performance is negatively affected. Conversely, optimism is seen to create the conditions for performance and growth.

More recently, the still relatively emerging research conducted in the field of neuroscience has confirmed some of the discoveries and conclusions made in the field of psychology and economics. Specifically, it establishes a link between (i) a prosperous and fulfilled workforce and (ii) the professional performance of the individual, the company

14. Quoted in *ibid.*

and even the country. Thus, happiness, and the optimism that both underpins it and stems from it, would have a real and significant impact on well-being.

This undoubtedly also explains the enthusiasm of companies and governments for measuring optimism, which is a precious terrain in which a desirable future can emerge and flourish.

There is a growing movement to measure levels of national well-being and development using alternative criteria to those used for decades, such as GDP, which has been in use since the inter-war period.

The pulse of the economic world and the population is regularly taken through surveys and studies in order to assess the level of optimism of individuals and in particular that of business leaders.

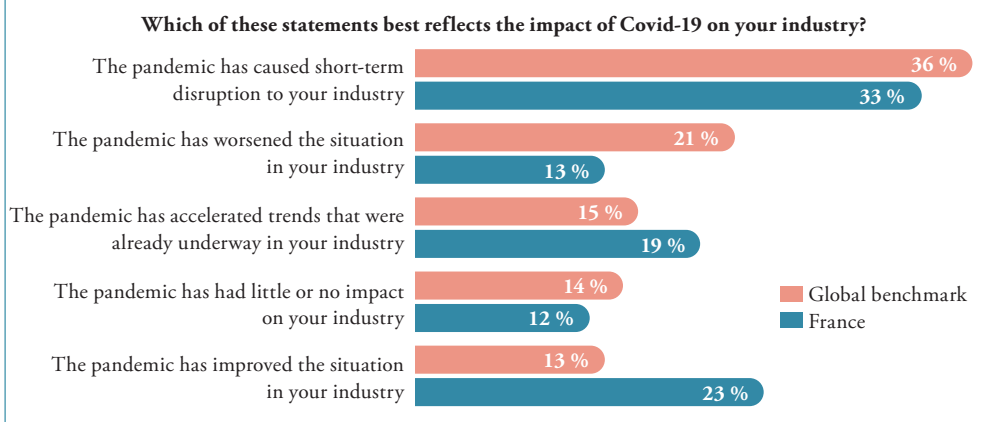
After two years of the pandemic and in a particularly turbulent social, environmental and geopolitical context, how is the morale of companies?

According to a recent study by the firm Ernst & Young, “Leaders of large companies and large intermediate-sized enterprises show great optimism and confidence in the future, which should translate into a determined desire for growth.”¹⁵

- For a third of French and global CEOs the pandemic has caused a “disruption” in their industry, but compared to global CEOs, 23% of the French believe it was for the better (and 13% for the worse). Their global counterparts have the exact opposite view.
- 67% percent of French CEOs want to accelerate their investments abroad, compared to 45% of global CEOs.
- 70% of French executives believe that their investors support long-term growth initiatives, while only 47% of global executives feel the same way.
- 66% of French executives consider ESG criteria to be an important value driver for their company, compared to only 38% of global executives.

Consequences of the pandemic

For a third of French and global CEOs the pandemic has caused a “disruption” in their industry, which they do not qualify as positive or negative. But whereas 21% of global CEOs consider that it was for the worse (and 13% for the better), the French executives have the opposite opinion and consider that it was for the better at 23% (and 13% for the worse). Does this reflect the historical ability of French CEOs to question themselves in the face of major difficulties?



15. Bruno Bousquié, “Les dirigeants français plus optimistes que leurs homologues du reste du monde ?”, Ernst & Young, 9 February 2022.

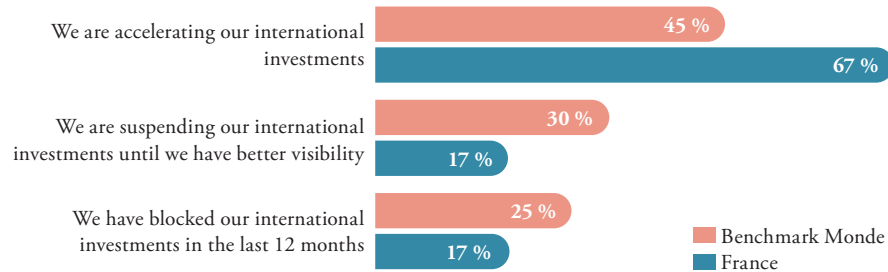
Investments

While nearly 20% of global executives say they are stopping their investments abroad, only 7% of their French counterparts intend to do so, while 67% want to accelerate their investments abroad, compared to 45% of all global executives. For French executives, supporting the development of their international subsidiaries appears to be an opportunity, if not an imperative, despite a weakened €/ \$ exchange rate, and despite the geopolitical risk and protectionist attitudes perceived by global and French executives as the main obstacle to growth strategies.

In line with their global counterparts, nearly 80% of French executives say they have adapted or plan to adapt their supply chains and global industrial footprint. The current shortages of materials and components cannot be endured in the long term: large companies and SMEs are therefore rethinking their operations.

As a sign of either an assumed dynamism or a delay in the last few years, French managers rank digital transformation in first place as an area of resource allocation (29%), whereas it only ranks in second place (20%) in the global benchmark.

Are geopolitical risks forcing you to adapt your investment strategy?



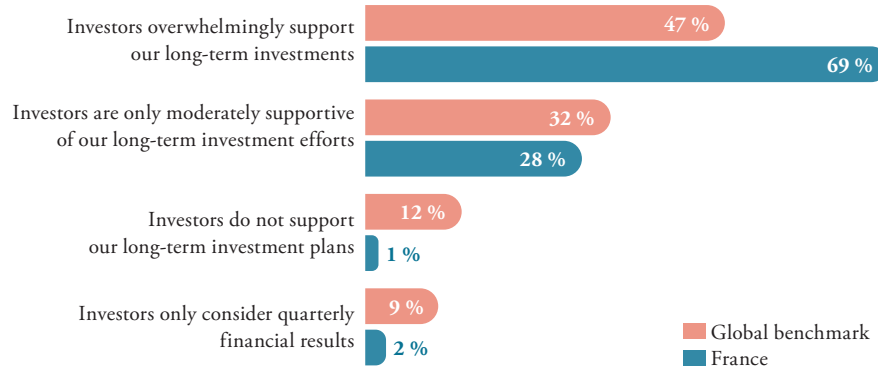
Investor support

When asked “to what extent do investors support your long-term growth initiatives?”, 70% of French executives consider that their investors overwhelmingly support this type of investment, whereas only 47% of global executives feel the same way.

The gap becomes even wider when it comes to ESG. 65% of global executives believe they have had to deal with resistance from investors and/or their shareholders in terms of environmental transition strategy, whereas only 22% of French business leaders make the same observation.

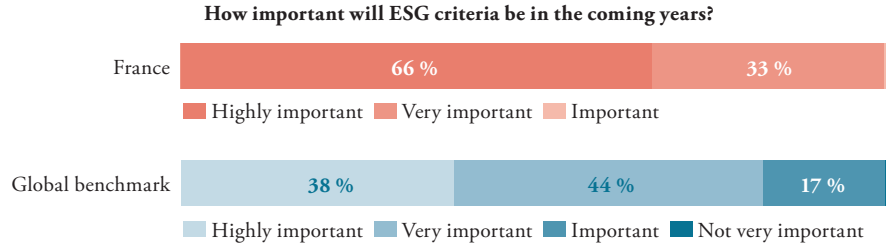
Perhaps these two elements are the consequences of a shareholder and banking structure that is more long-term for French companies.

To what extent do investors support your long-term investments?

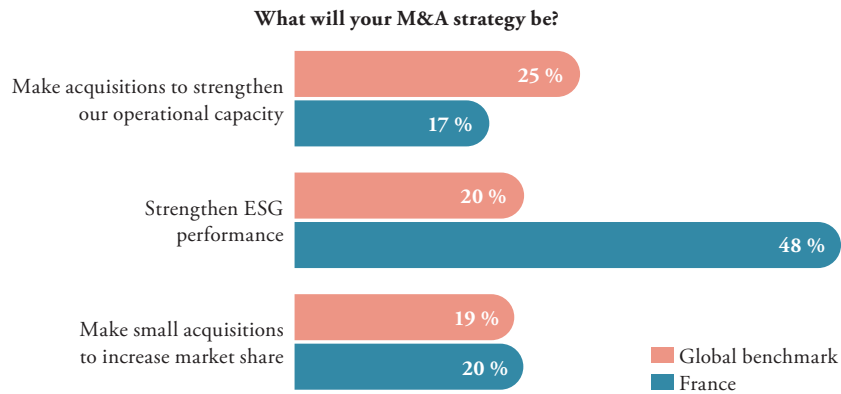


Environmental/ESG commitment

For 66% of French executives ESG criteria is considered an important value driver for their company in the coming years. Only 38% of global leaders are of the same opinion.



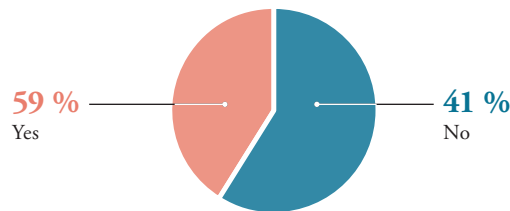
This same attachment to environmental issues appears in the M&A plans of French executives: strengthening their ESG performance and their sustainable footprint is the number one M&A activity envisaged by French executives, far ahead of the rest (48%), whereas it only ranks second place for global executives (20%), behind acquisitions aimed at increasing operational capacity. Have French managers become idealists? No, they are convinced that the ESG dimension plays and will play an important role in the creation of future value.



M&A activity

French and global executives agree that they plan to carry out M&A operations in the next twelve months (for 60% of them), with acquisitions being the main focus, as only slightly more than 10% are considering disposals.

Do you think your company will be able to pursue its M&A strategy in the next twelve months?



Source: L'étude EY Outlook

Like businesses and governments, the financial markets themselves echo these measures of happiness and well-being and fluctuate with the confidence indices.

Understanding the state of mind of economic actors, and being able to qualify it (optimistic or pessimistic), appears to be one of the factors with (high) predictive value. However, by nature, human beings are averse to uncertainty. Companies, governments and markets are no exception to this principle and try to make the future a little more predictable.

Therefore, these indicators refer to data and statistics that, in turn, focus on the factors that influence business decisions. Barometers of confidence and steering tools allow us to measure investors' expectations and/or the state of mind of the market. They are thus used to better anticipate market trends and the orientations of economic agents.

This means that a true "well-being economy" is developing, and with it, a new way of provoking and measuring success and performance, whether individual or collective.

Are we seeing a major shift in the relationship between organizations and the notion of optimism and happiness because, as the saying goes, "what gets measured gets managed".

Moreover, in an international context marked by profound and sometimes violent geopolitical and economic, health and environmental, social and societal upheavals, there are many reasons to doubt the future and better days ahead.

How can we not feel powerless in the face of the magnitude of the challenges we face? How can we not be tempted by defeatism and renunciation?

Is it utopian or naïve to continue to believe in our power to act? Do we really have any other choice than to live and invent new solutions and paradigms to ensure the sustainability of life and of what we value? Can we cultivate faith in tomorrow? What can the most optimistic among us teach?

Our challenge here is to further develop Altrad's "social" skills and to strategically manage the conditions that will create an enabling environment for the expression of talent, motivation and commitment, while respecting the ecological concerns of all our stakeholders.

The second part of this document sets up a dialogue between our ambition to create value and performance in the service of our *raison d'être* and the sustainability of the Group. It lays the foundations for a reflection on (i) the importance of optimism as a driving force for action, and (ii) the notion of "education" in optimism, a strategic approach to which will be explored in the third section.



OPTIMISM: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR OUR ORGANIZATION?

The January–February 2012 issue of the *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*) introduced its main feature with the somewhat intriguing statement, “The Value of Happiness, how employee well-being influences profits”.

In what way is it interesting?

- First of all, it is interesting because it is an innovative statement that breaks with years of management that has been “indifferent” to well-being and happiness. For a long time in the workplace, emotions have been an ignored managerial issue. In a way, *homo economicus* was not a *homo sensibilis*.

Incorporating the findings of positive psychology and more recently neuroscience research, *HBR* establishes a correlation, or even causality, between the well-being of individuals and the financial performance of the organization. The idea is simple: happy, optimistic employees obtain better individual results and thus contribute to generating more profits.

Adopted at the end of the 1990s by the Gallup Institute along with many other companies, the idea has received increasing publicity and to a certain extent, has established itself as a new managerial model. However, it was not until 2013 that the first French-speaking conference on happiness at work was held.

- It is also intriguing insofar as the value of happiness lies in its ability to positively influence the creation of financial profits. As formulated, the proposal suggests that well-being is not an end in itself, an ultimate state for which humanist management seeks to create the conditions, but rather a means to the only important value creation: profit.

Well-being is thus instrumentalized. From a utilitarian rather than an ethical point of view, the company could exploit this positive link between its social performance (management of ill-being, prevention of psycho-social risks and promotion of well-being) and its economic performance. What impact might this “subjugation” of happiness to the financial objective have on the trust that individuals have in their company? Or could it be that what would prevail is the feeling of a win-win equation where – in the end – everyone benefits?

- It is also interesting because the connection between the notions of happiness, optimism and profitability suggests that unhappiness and pessimism are obstacles to performance. Unhappy or resigned employees would be less likely to believe in a possible improvement of their condition, of the particular situations to which they are exposed or of the more general context in which they evolve, and consequently less willing to take action. This, de facto, would have a negative impact on their level of commitment, and therefore on the performance of the organization.

On the contrary, optimism can create a psychological and social environment that generates energy. The influence of optimism on our level of motivation would be decisive. Beyond the classic questions surrounding the notion of motivation: what drives us to do things, why do we do them, where does our capacity to act come from, the notion of optimism introduces another dimension. It is as if optimism were the pool of confidence thanks to which “tomorrow has a future”. Taking action makes sense because there is a certain level of conviction that “it is possible and worthwhile”.

- It is interesting, again, because the report was published in a context where a number of surveys testify to a certain malaise and uneasiness at work, where the number of cases of burnout is exploding, and where, more recently, employees are resigning en masse. Is there not a paradox in designating the company as a possible place for the expression and development of happiness?

Or are we facing an interesting and potentially strategic reflection: what if it were possible to reconcile the irreconcilable? What if it were possible to intentionally create the conditions for increased confidence in oneself, in others, in the future and in optimism, and thus for increased and extended well-being, which would in turn influence the level of confidence and optimism, thus creating a virtuous circle leading to better performance and more value creation? Including within the company.

- Finally, it is worthy of attention because the underlying idea that appears in this mirroring of the two terms is that it is possible to act intentionally on happiness and the level of optimism, which corresponds to a challenge to the (widely) held belief that being optimistic or pessimistic is a question of character, identity, ontology. It would therefore finally be possible to influence this “invariant” and educate for optimism.

Why are we interested in these questions? If optimism and performance are linked, then the former becomes a condition (and perhaps an effect) of the latter and must be the subject of at least one reflection, or even a strategic approach.

OPTIMISM AT THE SERVICE OF ALTRAD'S PERFORMANCE

During our annual seminars, but also during discussions within the Group's companies, we have tried to define what we mean by performance. This generic notion, which is widely used in many fields, starting with the economic world, has been given a plural meaning, converging complementary notions (excellence, quality, growth, value creation) assessed in their capacity to bring us closer to the materialization of our *raison d'être*.

It is therefore quite “natural” that we consider here the link between optimism and performance, in its protean version as we understand it at Altrad.

Optimism and excellence, value creation, raison d’être

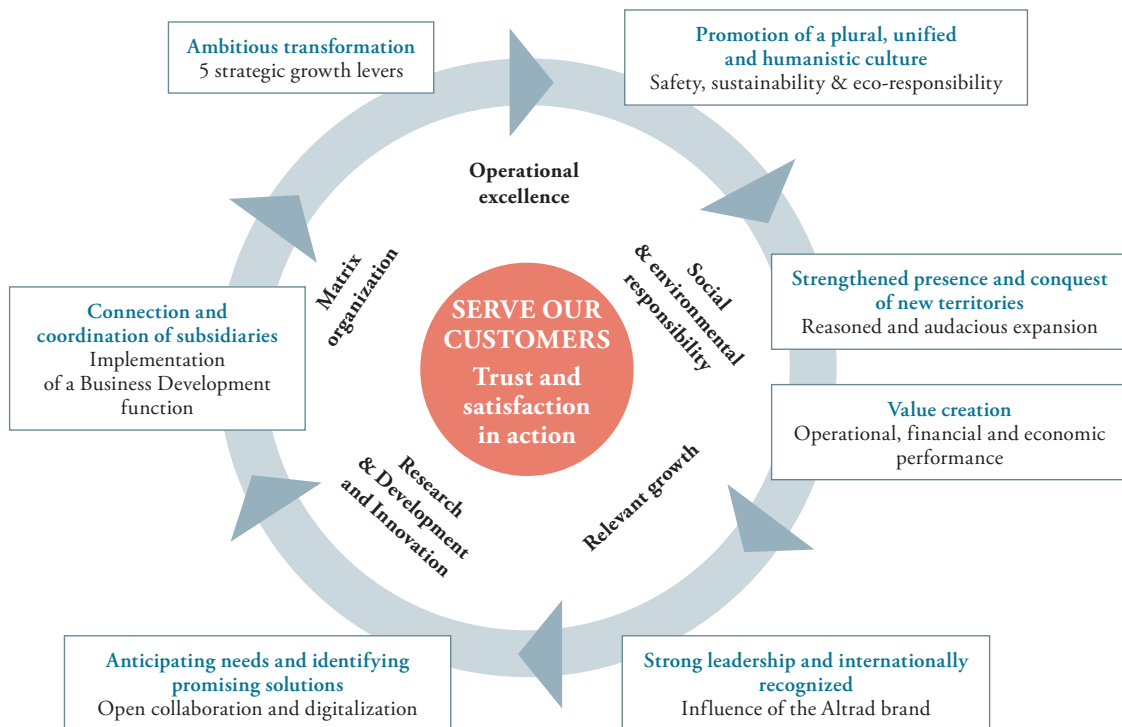
Let us first briefly review the major discussions we have had in recent years on:

- Excellence in the service of exacting quality, Value creation for controlled and sustainable growth, and
- Raison d’être.

These three areas of research and action have moulded our approach to our business, helped to reinforce the meaning of what we do, and contributed to the development of our professionalism. Together, they have enabled us to deliver improved performance and support the sustainable growth and durability of the Group.

One of the “hidden” virtues of this renewed exercise was to project ourselves into a future that corresponds to our own image, one that is realistic and achievable, and which we adhere to with confidence. In other words, we believed and continue to believe in our future.

Indeed, since Altrad’s creation, we have developed a unique management structure, a strong brand, enviable financial results, clear values, a bold and controlled growth strategy, which is continuous and exponential, and an ambitious vision for 2020+, as illustrated in the diagram below.



Excellence

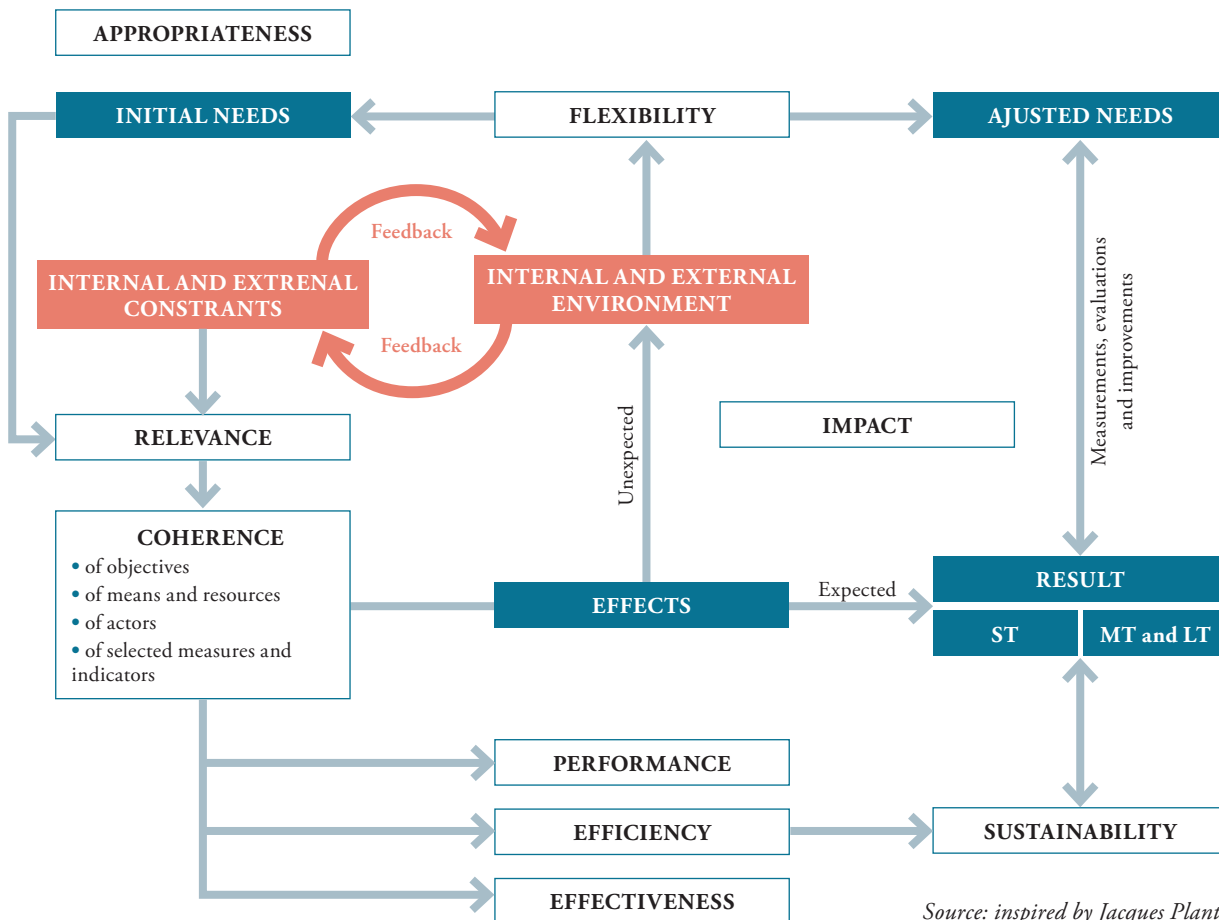
In order to continue the Altrad adventure and take it to the next level, we have reiterated our commitment to excellence. At the centre of all our activities and at the heart of our strategy, excellence is seen as a means to serve multiple objectives and ambitions, including:

- customer satisfaction;
- group performance and competitiveness;
- safety of goods and people;
- the growth of individuals, teams and the company.

We claim this approach to excellence as one of the keys to the Group’s success: excellence of structures, operating methods, production, products, services, leaders, employees, etc.

To achieve the level of excellence we are aiming for, we continue to define clear and measurable objectives that enable us to guide, analyse and adjust our actions to redefine new ones.

Components of quality and continuous adjustment cycle



Source: inspired by Jacques Plante and Chantal Bouchard, 2000.

Value creation

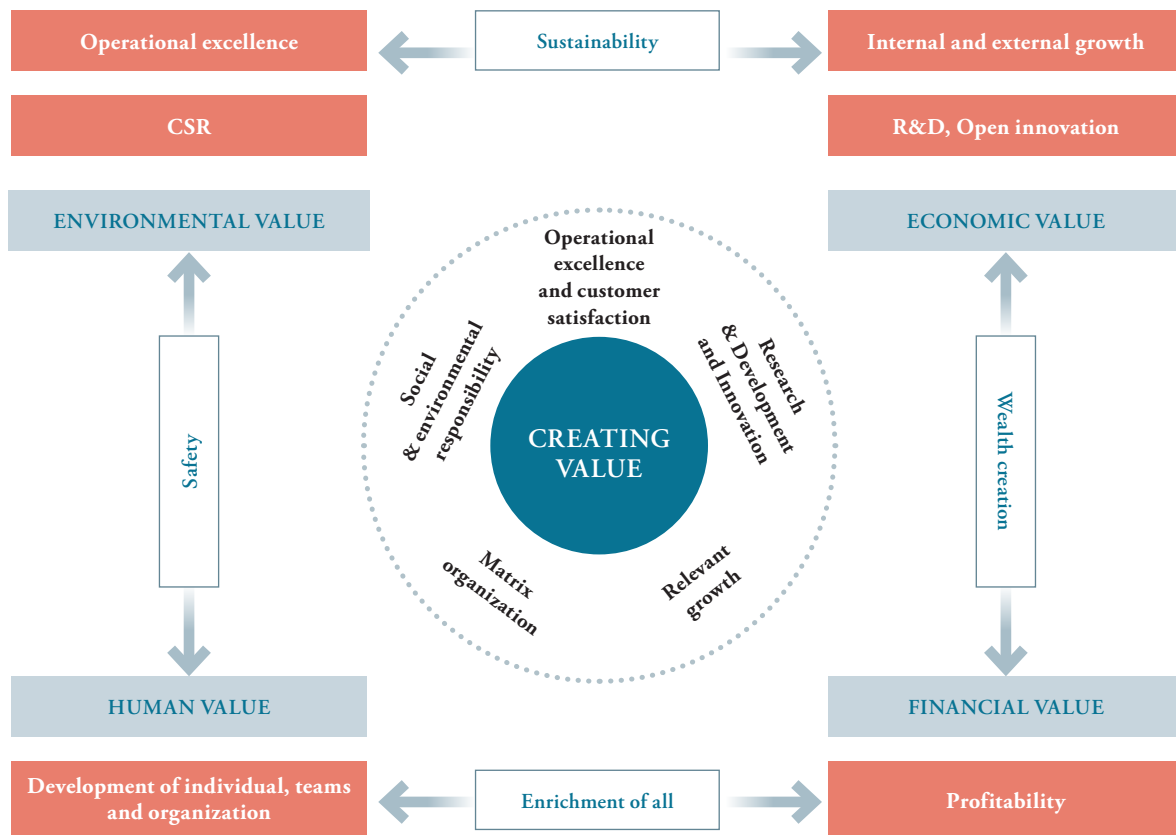
Over the course of 2019 and beyond, we have initiated a broad reflection on the notion of value creation, which we have chosen – within the Altrad Group – to understand holistically and to measure at multiple levels in the organization:

- Human value creation:
 - organizational excellence;
 - managerial excellence;
 - personal professional excellence.

- Economic value creation:
 - operational excellence;
 - development excellence;
 - excellence in innovation.

- Environmental value creation:
 - corporate Social Responsibility policy.

- Financial value creation:
 - financial rigour.



Value creation is relevant to the whole mosaic of company activities and levels.

In a cross-functional manner, the notions of excellence and value creation are based on a search for overall quality of:

- our products and services, which influences the level of satisfaction of our internal and external customers (operational and cross-functional dimension);
- our logistical, decision-making and production processes (vertical or hierarchical dimension), which determine our effectiveness and efficiency;
- collaboration (horizontal or joint dimension), which determines our commitment and motivation;
- employee development in terms of soft and hard skills (bilateral and personal relational dimension), which determines our competence and professionalism.

Where do we stand today? Three interrelated standpoints are used to assess our ambition for excellence and value creation:

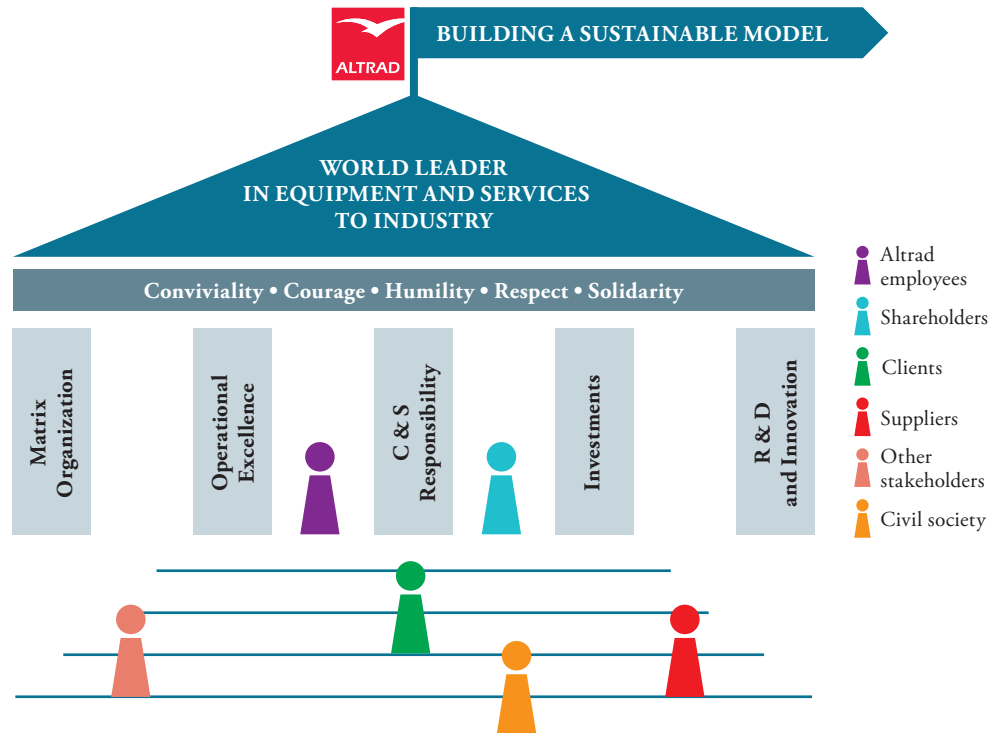
- Stated objective: desired value
The standpoint of quality, performance, excellence or success, contained and announced in the objectives aimed at and adopted by the Group.
What are our next challenges and mountains to climb? Are we in line with the market or do we aim to break new ground? Do we have the resources to achieve them or are we being unrealistic?
- Result achieved: value delivered
The standpoint of quality, performance, excellence or success achieved as it materializes in the course of its development and implementation and through the means, resources, actors involved, results obtained and effects induced.
To what extent does our ambition and its translation into objectives continue to create “total” value? What is our opportunity for improvement? What factors explain the gap between our ambitions and our achievements? What room for manoeuvre do we have? What must we accept? What do we need to change?
- Subjective appraisal: perceived value
The standpoint of perceived quality, performance, excellence or success, that is, as felt by the beneficiaries and recipients, that is, our employees, our clients, and all our direct and indirect partners.
What are the relevant measurement tools and indicators that will enable us to align ourselves with a shared diagnosis? What is most valuable to us? Is it in line with the Group’s ambition?

Ultimately, these objectives of excellence and value creation contribute to the fulfilment of our purpose: our *raison d’être*, that which gives meaning to and sustains our daily commitment. Their evaluation allows us to measure the progress we have made and the efforts we still have to make.

Raison d'être

Indeed, for many years now, we have been creating a shared narrative, focused on a purpose accepted by all. This raison d'être justifies Altrad's place in the world and the Group's particular interest in its stakeholders.

More recently, we have summarized it in an inspiring, ambitious motto: "Building a sustainable world".



In order to put this raison d'être into action, we express it in terms of ambition, we rely on values, which we translate into management principles. We make strategic choices and implement an action plan.

The framework we have adopted has enabled us to devise an original organizational model which, let's not forget, is based on five fundamental pillars: matrix organization, operational excellence, CSR, investments and R&D and innovation.

In addition, at every stage of our journey, we have focused our thinking on four key areas:

- meaning: understanding the world we live in, the environment in which the group operates and the context in which not only our employees operate, but also all our stakeholders;
- strategic vision: creating an ambitious and exciting image of the future we have designed and towards which we choose to direct our energies and skills;
- relationships: forging links between the different structures of the Group through a matrix organization, between each of us within Altrad (collaboration) and with our external partners (customer satisfaction at the centre and open innovation) in order to coordinate and implement our vision;

- innovation: developing new ways of embodying our values, of working for the sustainable and controlled growth of the Group (R&D, innovation) and working together in a spirit of excellence.

Thinking about our performance and mission in terms of excellence, value creation and purpose has enabled us to propel the Group to new heights and meet new challenges.

As we mentioned during our last seminar, one of the major challenges for Altrad is to reconcile shareholder value, prosperity for the company and its stakeholders, in a context of responsible consideration of the impact of the Group's activity on its immediate environment, but also, more broadly, on the living world and society.

Has this vast project become a reality? Have the necessary lines of thought and action that we have put in place proved to be useful and effective? Are they sufficient?

Is it possible, or even essential, to widen our field of exploration to other areas, starting with our state of mind, our morale and our level of confidence in ourselves, in the Group and in the future?

Do we still have sufficient faith in our ability to influence the future and impact our environment, especially after a major health crisis with multiple financial, economic and organizational implications?

How do we overcome the inevitable moments of doubt? Do we remain mobilized – individually and collectively – to meet the challenges ahead? How does a strategic approach to this aspect of team management apply? Do we also need to manage our social performance (differently)?

It seems to us that this is an important investigation – perhaps somewhat “neglected” so far – to continue to adapt our actions with a view to continuous improvement of our practices, to a possible evolution of our mission and to foster our desire to continue the Altrad adventure together. From this point of view, thinking about and developing optimism at the heart of our managerial practices may be relevant.

Beyond objectives, measurement indicators, processes, organizational modes, resources and logos, a company is (above all) a group of people brought together to satisfy a defined mission or ambition, a shared intention, as described by a common narrative. Without individuals who choose (most often) to come together in order to do together what they could not do alone or do as well, there is no business. In other words, the human being is at the heart of the system.

A FEW POINTS ON SYSTEMIC THINKING

In keeping with the systemic approach, let us take the time to set out a few “theoretical” elements in order to consider:

- the influence and role of optimism on our individual and collective moods on the one hand and on our power to act on the other;
- and the impact of our actions, thoughts and feelings on our level of optimism.

Relational system

In the world of human organizations, a system is a set of interacting people, in a relationship, united by a common and defined purpose. Therefore, every system is teleological

(oriented towards a defined common goal). At a minimum, this common goal is the survival of the system.

In the same way, each individual – each of us, therefore – constitutes a system in its own right (that is, a person is made up of organs, cells, etc.), a subsystem of a larger organization (the Altrad Group, for example), which is itself a subsystem of an even larger organization (such as society, for example), which is itself a subsystem of a larger universe (the country, the earth, for example). It is a bit like representing reality as Russian dolls that fit together. There are thus systems and sub-systems, separated, more or less hermetically, by boundaries.

Indeed, a system presupposes the existence of boundaries which – by definition – delimit its contours, that is, an inside and an outside. These same boundaries also define what the system is capable of. In more organizational terms, we speak of powers.

Any open system is in dialogue with other systems, whether they are on the boundary or more distant. A system is said to be open “when it interacts with its environment, that is, when it exchanges messages (information) with the outside world: thus permeable to its context, its behaviour and equilibrium will be largely dependent on it”.¹⁶

Every system exists in a narrative. A system is coherent through the fiction it carries. It exists in language. This means that the reality of an individual or a group of individuals (= a system) depends on the narrative.

Any dynamic system unfolds over time, which produces a history that is constructed. The actors who make up the system exchange information. These interactions are of such frequency and variety that they define a sense of belonging, a common history. This history gives rise, little by little, to the emergence of an identity, which some people call a culture.

Every system exists in a given context, in an environment, in an ecology. The context in which the system operates determines what happens in it.

The Altrad Group can thus be described as a set of individuals organized around a shared purpose – “Building a sustainable world” – which is based on a story woven from five key values – conviviality, courage, humility, respect and solidarity – initially held by its founder and adopted by all, in the service of creating human, economic, financial, social and societal wealth.

Between each of us, between each of the physical and symbolic elements of this system, there is a multitude of relationships that are both fixed and mobile, perennial and changing.

At the centre: the people of Altrad who together write a common history. Through their actions and the way we choose to report on them.

Because it is a living entity, the Altrad Group’s system is affected by the issues and questions that affect living beings, both individually and collectively.

There are many philosophical debates that attempt to define what humans are, what drives them, what distinguishes them from other living beings and directs their actions (see above).

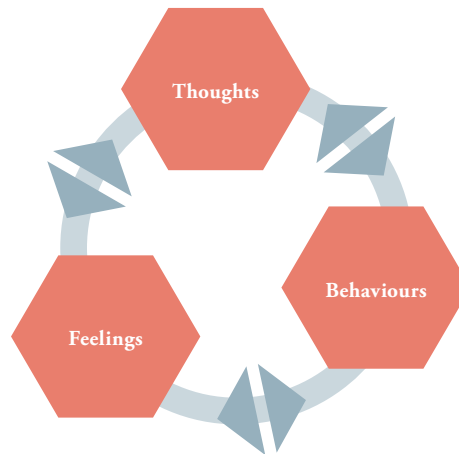
Let us consider here – schematically – that a human being is a system made up of three main (and non-hierarchical) “dimensions”, which are:

16. Arnaud Bornens and Nicolas Mathieu, *La logique de l'acouphène, petit traité de développement relationnel* (Paris: Enrick B. Éditions, 2019), p. 288.

1. Their thoughts (their beliefs, mental reflections)
2. Their feelings (their emotions and physical sensations)
3. Their behaviour (decisions implemented as actions).

Thoughts, feelings and behaviour influence each other:

- what I think influences what I feel and what I do;
- what I feel influences what I think and do;
- what I do influences what I think and feel.



Each element of the system is therefore subject to multiple internal influences that contribute to its evolution and maintenance.

Change at the heart of the life of systems

Every living system adapts in real time in order to – at the very least – maintain its equilibrium (this is called homeostasis).

Adaptation can take place internally, that is, as a result of endogenous informational changes (changes within the system) and externally, in response to changes in the environment. In practice, since no system is totally closed or totally open, adaptation is a combination of the two.

Since change is permanent, the system is constantly dealing with the information available to it, information which it synthesizes. This information is different in nature, intensity and frequency. It is organized along lines of force that are both stable and unstable.

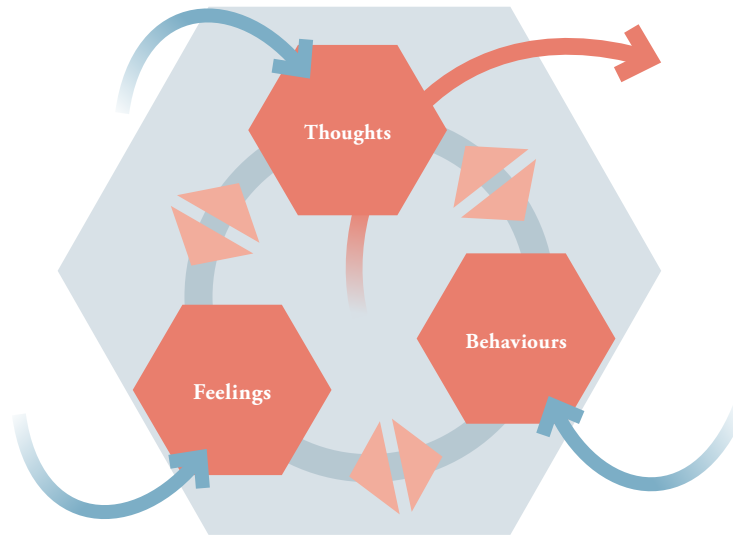
A given system reaches a tipping point when adaptation can no longer take place according to the terms of the system:

- either as a result of an external event that strongly disrupts the system (for example, a serious crisis shakes my confidence in the future, plunging me into a certain pessimism or fatalism);
- or that the tensions present have to be distributed differently following a succession of internal changes that were previously little or unnoticeable, but whose accumulation requires a new configuration.

This is called a crisis.

Thoughts, feelings and actions:

- influence each other;
- and also influence the individual's context (and the individuals with whom they are in contact);
- This context also influences the individual, in a game of reciprocal influences that force the system (individual) and the environment to regulate the changes thus brought about, which could be represented schematically by the following drawing:



In other words, there is a process of constant adaptation, conscious or unconscious, voluntary or involuntary, to the changes or imbalances created with a view to either (i) restoring the previous equilibrium, or (ii) seeking a new equilibrium.

To guarantee the coherence of its boundaries, and therefore its survival, a system tends to act according to two energies. The boundary is therefore the result of the balance between

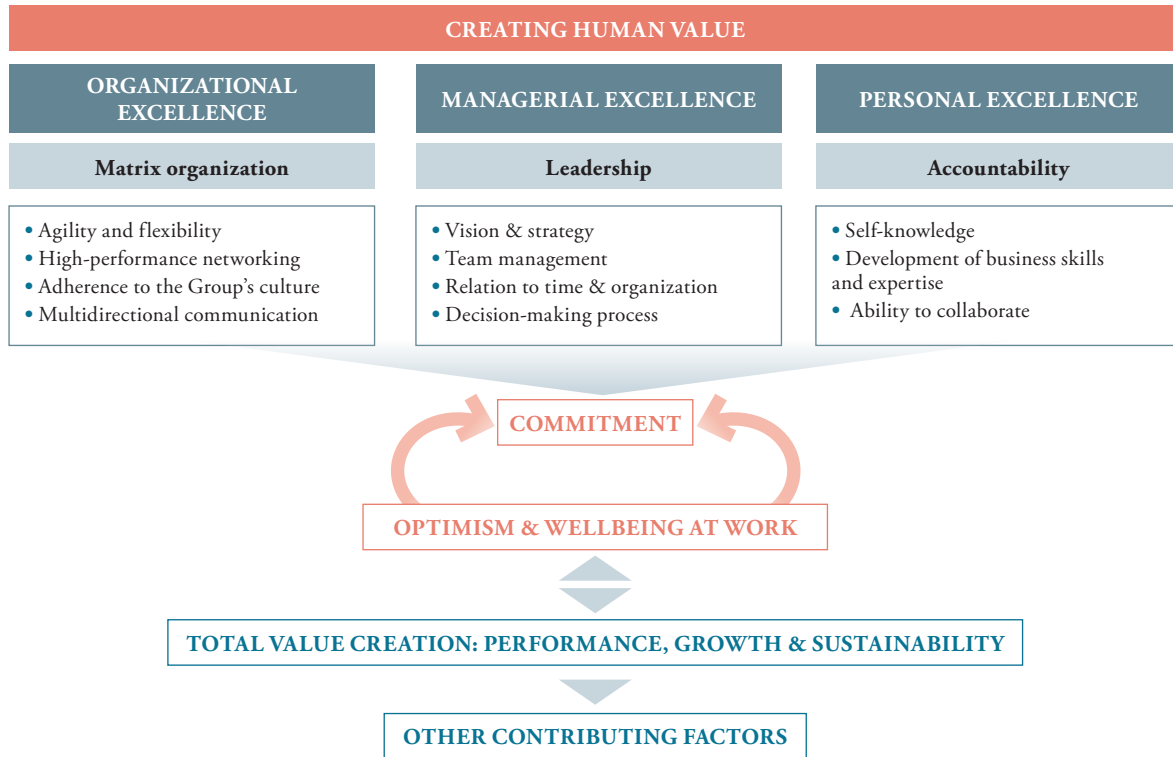
- entropy: the force of dissipation or disorganization of the system;
- negentropy: the force of organization of the system.

Since all systems tend to dissipate (according to a model identical to that observed for the expanding universe, that is, in disorganization), there is a permanent regulation that allows the system to maintain its form, this regulation relies on the organization of individuals within the system.

This diversion via systemic thinking allows us to look at optimism and its effect on a given system (be it an individual, a company or a country) from a different angle.

Optimism, like confidence, is thus understood not as a character trait, an identity characteristic, an immutable state of mind, but rather as the emergent (or resultant) property of particular relationships between an individual and their own self, an individual and others, an individual and their broader context, or even their relationship to the world, and vice versa.

This means that it is possible to act on the nature of the relationships, either by changing them or by viewing them in a different light, to create the conditions for optimism to emerge.



For us, it is a question of reflecting on what we can concretely – and ethically – do to

- create the conditions for maintaining a certain level of optimism (below which action is no longer meaningful or interesting) that can release energy, develop motivation and commitment and encourage individual and collective action;
- create the conditions for a reversal of the trend in situations where pessimism and defeatism dominate, preventing individuals and teams from getting moving when they feel, in certain circumstances, that the adversity or obstacle they are facing cannot be overcome, will extend to all areas of their lives and will be permanent;
- the aim is to help change the perception of the situation in order to enable each person to reconnect to their resources and to a certain level of confidence in themselves, in others and in the future, and regain their ability to act.

When a difficulty seems surmountable, it becomes temporary and limited, both in space and time. The horizon opens up. Action is possible and meaningful. The capacity to act is recovered.

Maintaining a certain level of optimism is therefore critical to ensure the sustainability of the system which, deprived of all initiative and will to act on the part of its actors, would be subject to the exogenous forces of its environment and could come to an end.

The notion of resilience is therefore related to that of optimism.

OPTIMISM AT THE SERVICE OF THE RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE GROUP

What is resilience?

Originally, the notion of resilience belongs to the field of physics and characterizes the energy absorbed by a body during a deformation. For several decades, this concept has been deployed in the field of mental health and describes the “resumption of a new development after a trauma” (Boris Cyrulnik).

From Tom Thumb to Snow White, through ancient myths and epics, there are many tales of resilience in which the hero, after a major ordeal, finds the energy to resist, adapt and finally to grow from this very adversity.

Trials are inevitable over the course of a lifetime. Natural disasters, exposure to violence, accidents, falls, serious illnesses, emotional losses and abandonment can cause deep trauma, not only to the individual, but also to those around them.

Traumatic shock occurs when we are confronted with serious events that threaten our lives and physical integrity and that exceed our capacity to react.

When a company is subject to changes in its environment, however sudden or significant, it seems more appropriate to talk about its capacity to adapt, rather than its resilience. During previous seminars, we have discussed the flexibility and adaptability demonstrated at Altrad. In this respect, the efforts made in recent years have been remarkable.

Strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to talk about the resilience of a company when the trials it has faced are of a traumatic or dangerous nature. Fortunately, these events are relatively rare.

In the context of Altrad, resilience, is based on our ability to regain our mobility and efficiency after a major ordeal or event, such as the pandemic or ongoing energy crisis. Following the initial shock, we were able to reconnect to our essential energy in order to resist the temptation of fear and abandonment. We have been able to deal with the new environment that has been imposed on us and the rest of the planet. We have been able to rethink and rebuild our organization to adapt to its new reality, and above all, we have been able to honour our values of courage and solidarity.

Resilience is a mechanism, a process, that can emerge in the face of adversity that may threaten the survival or integrity of the organization.

The difficulties that every company faces at some point are an invitation to reflect and act. In our case, the economic crises, the reconfiguration of Altrad’s competitive landscape, and other challenges we have faced in recent years have led us to rethink our model and test its relevance, now and in the future.

Was our growth strategy a response to these difficulties or changes in our environment alone? No. It is and was also the implementation of a threefold ambition:

- first and foremost, to offer our clients a service that is as close as possible to their needs, which are by nature changing;
- but also to involve all Altrad employees and stakeholders in an adventure worthy of the name, an inspiring adventure, full of life and meaning;
- finally, a more personal ambition, for some of us, which is undoubtedly part of a logic of resilience.

Has Altrad's integrity or durability been threatened? The threat has sometimes been real. However, we never considered that the situation was lost, that we had no means of action, and that we had to give up.

On the contrary, we reiterated our confidence in the survival, sustainability and purpose of Altrad, which continues to follow a path of ongoing ethical growth.

Clearly, we have found ways to instil this level of confidence in the solidity of the Group, in the strength and competence of its employees, and in its ability to adapt, despite the setbacks.

Have we taken a strategic approach to managing this confidence and our "reasoned" optimism? Is there room for improvement?

Organizational resilience

The term resilience is not familiar to the business world. However, it is now increasingly used by organizations. Why is this? Organizations, like individuals, also experience trials, whether human, financial, economic, health or natural, which can jeopardize the organization's survival or significantly disrupt its balance.

"Organizational resilience allows us to face adversity, to bounce back and to learn from experience. It is a complex construct, involving interactions between individuals, the organization and its environment. It takes place over time and acts on the durability of organizations.

The resilience factors identified in the literature are numerous, often concerning opposing forces to be reconciled, such as:

- defensive/proactive approaches;
- loss/gain of meaning;
- facing threats/seizing opportunities;
- objectivity/creativity;
- operational efficiency/perpetual renewal etc.

Normandin and Therrien (2016) suggest a reconciliation of resilience factors by proposing to read through the dynamics of order and disorder in complex systems and argue that resilience emerges from favourable order and disorder (creating conformity and diversity in the system), while vulnerability results from unfavourable order and disorder."¹⁷

In terms of resilience, and according to the systems approach and complexity theory, it is important to:

- bear in mind that any system acts (and is permanently subjected to) two opposing energies: entropy and negentropy (see above);
- identify the factors of order (negentropy) and disorder (entropy) which contribute to or allow the emergence of resilience;
- consider that the capacity for resilience must be assessed in terms of the complementarities and interdependencies between factors.

17. Marta Crenn, "Résilience organisationnelle et pérennité : complexité et ambidextrie élargie", *Colloque pluridisciplinaire sur le temps – Les dimensions du temps dans le développement des hommes et des organisations*, March 2018.

Roughly speaking, let us recall that the whole is more (or less) than the sum of its parts and that consequently $1 + 1$ can be equal to 3 or 1, as different factors can mutually (i) amplify their particular effects or (ii) on the contrary, reduce their respective impact.

In systems thinking, we speak of non-summation: there are emergent properties of the system other than the sum of the properties of its components. For example, a car, made up of several parts, can drive. However, these same parts, when not assembled and placed on the ground, do not constitute a car. What the car has beyond the sum of its parts is the exchange of information between the parts, that is, their organization.

In a system of human interactions there are also emergent properties of the system. Let us begin by raising the possibility that resilience, or optimism, might be an emergent property of a system. For example, a challenge that cannot be met by one person becomes entirely achievable for a group of people, as the saying “strength in numbers” illustrates. Or that in an expedition, sometimes all it takes is for a few walkers to keep their spirits up for the whole group to reach their destination.

One consequence of these assumptions or observations is that when it comes to defining the factors of resilience (and hence optimism) and the scale of their contribution to successful resilience, it is important to consider not only the individual influence of each factor but also their combined or coordinated effect.

The third part of this paper looks at strategic actions we can take to create the conditions for optimism to foster commitment and performance, while considering potential pitfalls.



OPTIMISM: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR ITS EMERGENCE, MAINTENANCE AND DEPLOYMENT

“From a professional point of view, optimism plays an important role: studies show that optimists are healthier, get sick less often, have more citizenship behaviours, have higher salaries than their pessimistic colleagues and are more successful, committed and satisfied at work. Furthermore, there are positive correlations between employees’ optimism and their job satisfaction, performance (as assessed by supervisors) and citizenship behaviours at work.”¹⁸

According to Ana Camargo, who cites various studies to support her claims, optimistic employees and leaders in organizations are not only healthier and report greater well-being, but are also more persistent and innovative. They perceive failures with more distance, partly because (i) they have a positive attitude towards the future, but also (ii) because they feel they have a large amount of accessible resources and are therefore able to deal with difficulties successfully.

This is supported by a study conducted by Harvard and MIT, which found that there is a clear increase in companies’ interest in the effects of positivity on their results. While the importance and reliability of a positive approach to organizational change and business effectiveness may have been controversial, two more recent studies, one conducted in the financial industry, the other in the pharmaceutical industry, conclude that there is a link between so-called positive practices and indicators of greater organizational effectiveness. Performance is partly linked to the implementation of “positive” practices. Moreover, improvements in these practices are even predictive of subsequent improvements in effectiveness.¹⁹

Happy employees are twice as likely not to be ill, 31% more productive and 55% more creative.

18. Ana Camargo, “Comment cultiver l’optimisme au travail”, *Harvard Business Review*, 3 September 2018.

19. Kim Cameron, Carlos Mora and Margaret Calarco, “Effects of Positive Practices on Organizational Effectiveness”, *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 47, no. 3 (26 January 2011).

It should be remembered that for the generation of millennials, who will represent 75% of the working population in 2025, the primary criterion for loyalty to a company is well-being.

From both a philosophical and an economic point of view, it would seem to be in the company's interest to take a serious look at the issue of happiness and well-being at work. How can such a culture be nurtured?

As mentioned above, optimism can be understood in two main ways:

- dispositional optimism: according to this mode or current of thought, optimism is seen as a disposition, a personality trait which, a priori, would remain stable over time. In this sense, an optimist is presented as someone who is more persevering than others, by nature;
- stylistic optimism: according to current thinking, optimism is a style, a temporary state, a way of apprehending the world which evolves according to the context. Optimism explains a difficulty or failure a posteriori as being at least partly linked to an external factor or independent of oneself (principle of distinguishing between self and context), an isolated and specific event (principle of non-contagion), that can evolve (principle of limitation in time).

According to the first school of thought, optimism is considered “natural” and therefore cannot be influenced. At best, the pessimist has to learn to live with their pessimism, while the optimist can enjoy their luck.

According to the second, however, it would be possible to influence the level of optimism of an individual and consequently of a group of individuals. This means that education for optimism is possible.

The world of organizations is a human world and as such it is not immune to the characteristics of living beings, their relationships, emotions and feelings, including suffering (and well-being).

As resolute optimists (and realists!), we wager here that it is possible to create the conditions for the emergence, development and maintenance of a certain optimism. This third part is therefore devoted to a strategic approach to optimism, in companies in general and within Altrad in particular, and to the means that can be used to spread this positive way of looking at oneself, others and the world.

The stakes are high! It is a question of helping us to move away from an ontological logic, in the name of which the identity of an individual (or the description of a given situation) is assigned to a fixed state, to a reductive definition, to a relational logic: the relationship that each person maintains with himself, with others and the world.

This means that in a systemic approach to the world, meaning is not contained in the object, but in the relationship of the object to its context. In other words, it is possible:

- on the one hand, to consider any identity, any situation as process-based and evolving (not definitive);
- on the other hand, to consider that our perception is, by definition, subjective and partial, and does not capture the entirety of reality.

Thus, by modifying our perception of a person or a situation, it is possible to act on the relationship we have with that person or that situation and regain a certain margin of manoeuvre or power of action.

THE LEADER'S IMPETUS

For thirty years, the Altrad Group has continued to grow and evolve. Thanks to (i) opportunities identified both in its original markets and in new sectors (activity, geography, etc.) and (ii) robust organic growth, the Altrad Group continues to transform itself, day by day.

As an international and multidisciplinary player, it aims to become the industry leader in each of its markets and businesses, while guaranteeing its employees, customers and shareholders continuous, solid and sustainable performance:

- maintaining and improving a strong return on invested capital;
 - providing the best products and services on the market;
 - increasing the recurrence of its revenues and profits;
- and doing so with a view to sustainable development.

The spirit of conquest that has driven the Group since its inception aims to build a unique company in both senses of the term:

- one and the same path but also specific and differentiated;
- in order to create value (in the broadest sense of the term), to share greater benefits in the service of development (technical, human, financial, etc.) and the survival of the Group.

While our strategy has always been one of both external and internal growth, never before has the Group's development, as illustrated by its major acquisitions in recent years, been on such a scale and in such a time span. This unprecedented scale of growth is a major challenge in several respects:

- how to integrate newcomers while respecting their culture, as the Altrad Group has always done?
- how can the takeover be converted into a successful growth experience, where the expected synergies are effectively implemented, where the profitability of the new entity benefits from the contributions of the acquired companies, and where the employees manage to adhere to the new entity and mobilize their energies?
- how can we continue to generate growth – an essential condition for the Group's survival – while limiting the harmful effects that rapid and significant growth could have on the Group's fundamentals? In other words, how to create the conditions for a reasoned, coherent and relevant development?
- how can we preserve the original mentality and the key elements of our culture that have made and continue to make Altrad a success?
- how can we maintain the fighting spirit at the root of any entrepreneurial project in order to guarantee the level of energy necessary to face our challenges and to consolidate our vision and maintain our course?
- how can we avoid the pitfalls of the necessary professionalization of our organization, which can complicate our decision-making processes, erode our responsiveness and dilute responsibilities, with the main risk of losing sight of our essential *raison d'être* (that is, the service we intend to provide for our stakeholders, starting with our clients)?

To put it another way, how can we enable the Group to continue the virtuous dynamic process it began almost thirty years ago and maintain its sustainable growth? How do we continue to create value and achieve our goals?

When asked by James Allen (Bain Consulting Group) and his associates why they were unable to achieve their goals, several companies gave answers that were mainly related to their internal organization:

- No interesting opportunities in their markets 15%
- Lack of in-house skills 23%
- Weak business plan 24%
- Organizational complexity 26%
- Culture (risk-averse) 34%
- Inability to focus on their core business 34%
- Insufficient resources 45%

These results suggest that the difficulties encountered in generating growth are less related to the competitive nature of the market than to the means and resources mobilized internally. The latter would seem to have a greater explanatory value for “success” and “failure” than elements external to the company.

Continuing his investigations, Allen looked at one of the elements of company culture that is sometimes – often – underestimated: the mentality of the founder. He also considered the correlation that may exist between this state of mind at the origin of the creation of a company and the success of companies.

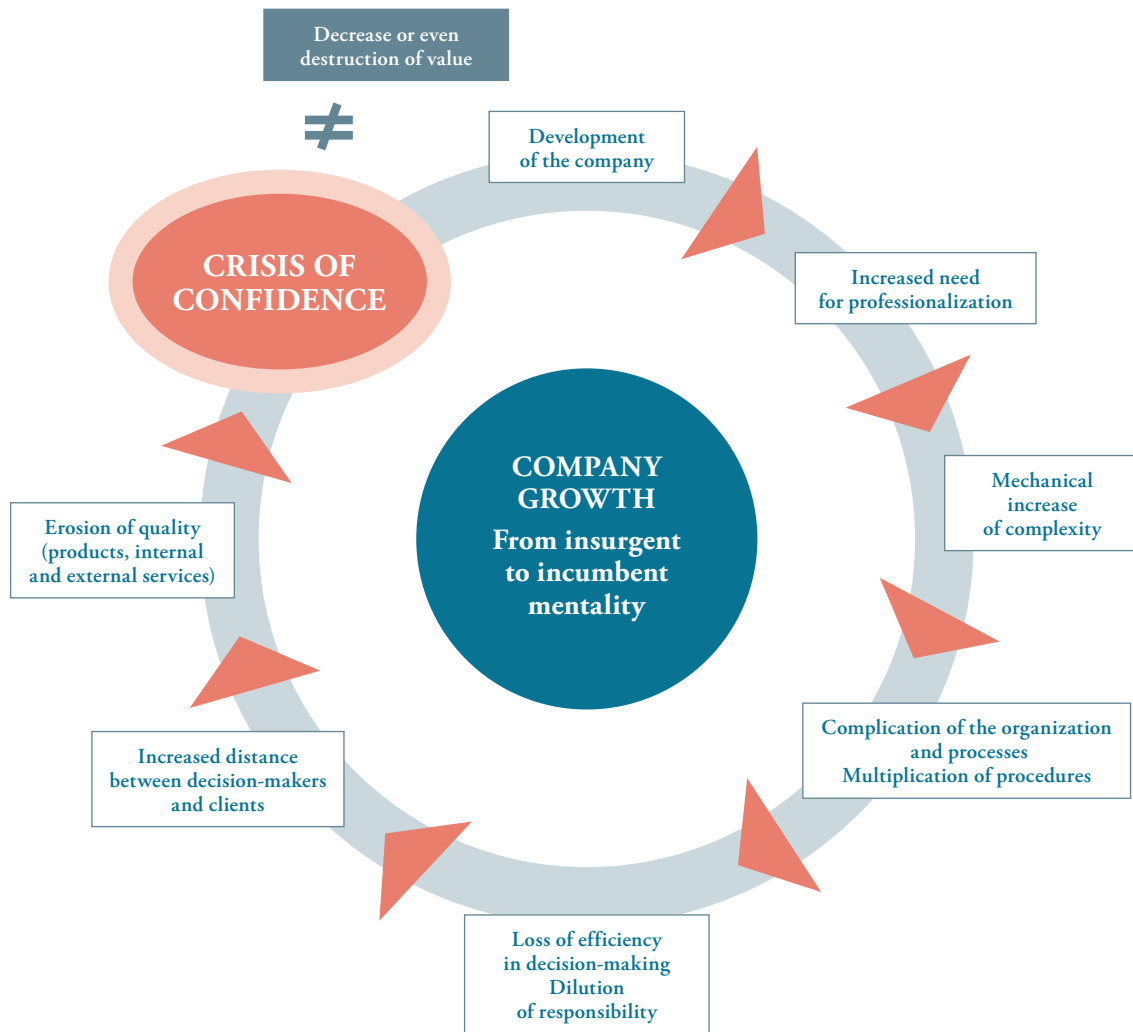
Thus, the more a company develops, the greater its need for professionalization, the more complicated the organization becomes (Allen talks of complexity), the more diluted the responsibility becomes, the more distance is created between decision-makers and clients and the more the company diverts from its original strength: its capacity to act quickly and efficiently in the service of its clients.

The following diagram illustrates this potentially deleterious and even dangerous process for the company, which, as it grows, (i) trades its outsider and “fighter” mentality in the service of satisfying the otherwise unsatisfied needs of its customers (ii) for the benefit of an incumbent mentality, in the name of which the company loses sight of its initial *raison d’être* and its culture of risk in order to defend its own organization and guarantee maximum security.

This challenge, which we highlighted in 2019, is the challenge faced by companies engaged in rapid and exponential growth, as is Altrad.

Today, as always, companies live in a competitive environment. Increasing competition, as understood in a capitalist economy, requires companies to grow (and perhaps to invent a new mode of collaboration, cooperation?) in order to survive. The Altrad Group is no exception to this.

Growth is a process by which a company changes its size (quantitative aspect) and/or nature (qualitative aspect). It can take different forms – internal growth, external growth, cooperation – the choice of which depends on the internal context of the organization, its environment, and the economic, competitive and financial context.

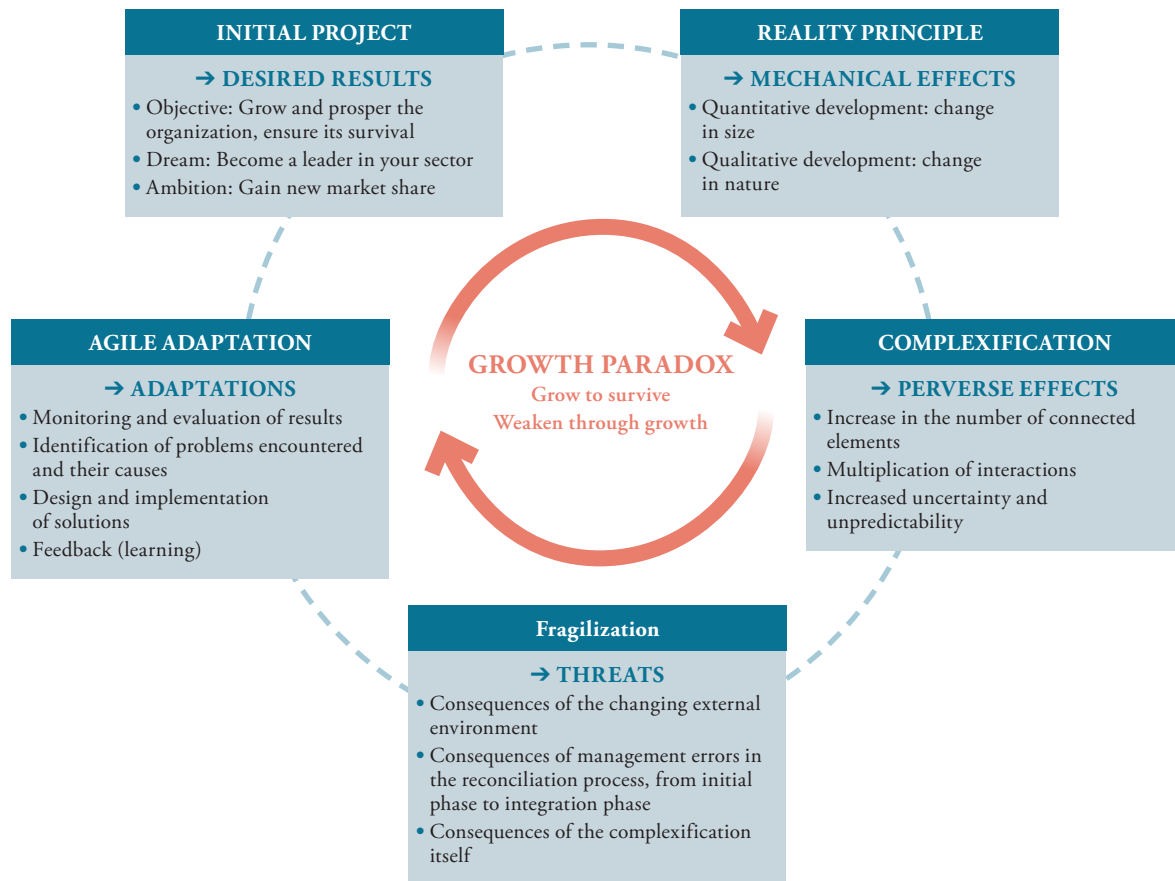


Potentially, it is a key element in value creation. In recent years, the Altrad Group's successful growth policy has enabled it to achieve:

- increased turnover;
- an increase in net profit;
- an exponential increase in the number of employees;
- the conquest of new sectors of activity;
- the penetration of new markets.

However, a development strategy is not without risk. The danger, as experienced by many companies that have embarked on growth operations, is that they will lose more than they gain from the implementation of their growth strategy. Making a large acquisition or a multitude of successful acquisitions is always a real challenge.

Impact of an external growth operation on an organization



How can we square the circle, otherwise expressed in terms of the “growth paradox”, according to which growth carries within it the obstacles to sustainable growth, in that it could:

- dilute the meaning of collective action;
- increase organizational complexity;
- disperse efforts and resources;
- lead to organizational, relational, and even financial and economic fragility.

A growth operation is mechanically accompanied by a certain number of effects – both quantitative and qualitative – which affect the company in all its components and dimensions.

The more a company seeks to strengthen itself through a policy of development (particularly external development), the more it weakens itself – in that it exposes itself to increased disorder – before finding – if necessary – a new equilibrium. This is what is known as the growth paradox.

The growth operations carried out by the Altrad Group create – for it too – the conditions for greater temporary disorder insofar as the change in size results in a greater number of constituent elements and an increased number of interactions (between these elements on the one hand and between these elements and the outside world on the other).

The threats that potentially accompany any growth operation can be grouped into two main categories:

- potential fragility linked to increased complexity;
- fragmentation of entities, loss of information and coherence and potential dilution of the decision-making process.

To these two categories, we should add the erosion of the founder's culture, their impetus and, with it, the loss or erasure of the factors that contributed to the organization's success, including: optimism and faith in the future.

The Altrad Group's development has not been linear and has been marked by pitfalls.

On the one hand, the Group has developed in environments that have not always been favourable to its growth. However, the two major crisis periods it has experienced have enabled it to develop resilience by consolidating its DNA through the collective learning necessary for its survival and sustainable development.

On the other hand, Altrad is facing increased complexity (new markets, new businesses, new employees, new local and entrepreneurial cultures, new management methods, etc.) that could hinder its progress.

The in-depth transformations undertaken over the last few years are a challenge for the Group, in terms of its ability to adapt to the new internal and external contexts it now faces.

In this context,

- how do we maintain a collective sense of purpose?
- how can we nurture the agility of the organization and avoid fossilization due to a possible increase in bureaucracy and inertia?
- how to allocate resources and energies in the best possible way and avoid their dispersion, which is synonymous with the dilution of their effectiveness as the group grows?
- how to achieve the objectives – particularly financial and economic – which justified the implementation of the growth strategy?

Its challenge – today as in the past – is not only to regain or even build a new balance and increased performance, which are essential to the survival of the company and signal the success of the growth operations undertaken, but also to reconnect with the founding energy of its leader.

Interestingly, this positive impetus does not only reside with the founder. Over the years it has been passed on to the company's leaders and employees, who have become true relays and ambassadors of the initial impulse of Altrad's founder.

The challenge remains (i) to succeed in (re)connecting to this optimism at times when the number and quality of challenges and obstacles are increasing and (ii) to model and exemplify it in order to:

- arouse, maintain and even amplify the optimism of teams when the meaning, usefulness and impact of their actions might be diluted by the effect of increased complexity and the organizational fragility and complication that this entails;

- (re)creating a virtuous dynamic of trust, especially in a context of upheaval that may appear particularly difficult, without which individuals, teams and the entire organization lose their power to act.

In his book *Éloge de l'optimisme, quand les enthousiastes font bouger le monde*, Philippe Gabilliet, a psychology professor specializing in the motivation and management of operational teams, explains the importance of managers and leaders adopting and demonstrating a positive attitude.

Faced with stress, the pressure of complex projects and the challenges of adverse situations, it is not always easy to remain positive and optimistic and not give in to the flood of negative emotions, or to the temptation to dramatize and give up.

Optimism, which is a source of enthusiasm, motivation and energy, is not (necessarily) self-evident, especially in the face of a difficulty that could destabilize the level of confidence of individuals or of the organization as a whole.

How can the leader's optimism and confidence be contagious and inspiring, not to say indispensable?

The optimism of the leader, of the leaders of the organization, contributes to the resilience of the organization.

When faced with a trauma, an ordeal or a crisis, there are two possible reactions:

- one can either submit, which leads to a psycho-traumatic syndrome where one remains a prisoner of the past, and frozen, without being able to act;
- or you can fight to start living again. But you don't live as you did before, because you have experienced an ordeal, a trauma, which has necessarily transformed you. From that point of view, there is a mourning to be done, which is not always easy. The mourning of the world before, of the life before, of the person we were. As Heraclitus said, "you never bathe in the same river twice".

Putting the past in the past, where it should remain, is not always easy. Sometimes the past gets in the way of our present and even our future. And sometimes the past, or more precisely what we are able to do with it, to learn from it, is what allows us to better face the challenges.

What are the factors that help us to overcome traumas and rise again after each ordeal? Probably, among others:

- self-confidence, despite moments of doubt;
- trust in others, when we realize that our destiny is (partly) linked to that of those around us and others further away;
- confidence in life, despite the blows of fate.

To speak of confidence is to speak of optimism.

The ethics of action

The aim is to create the conditions for action, its efficiency and its meaning.

Making Altrad an ever more resilient organization involves:

- our ability to free our company from any hindrances, from the complication that deprives it of the possibility of connecting to its potential;

- this means that we must be able to assess ourselves, without complacency but also without crippling negative criticism;
- our ability to maintain the founding spirit, the primary energy, both respectful of the Group's history and at the same time resolutely focused on its future;
- finally, our ability to act in solidarity to build, together, a project that makes sense for each of us and for society.

Our deep conviction is that our attempts make us strong. Our pain keeps us human. Our failures make us humble. Our successes make us brilliant.

The mindset of the founder

Following the work of the consultancy firm Bain,²⁰ the founder's mindset can be broken down into three main elements:

- the owner/shareholder mindset: "every euro is my euro", which, put another way, corresponds to the mindset in which everyone assumes a share of responsibility for the result and the means used to achieve it;
- the obsession with the front line: that is, our ability to stay close to our clients' needs and to maintain a continuous and sincere dialogue with them;
- the state of mind of "rebellion", of "combat": that is, our capacity to keep as a point of focus the *raison d'être* of our activity, the will that is ours, the "combat that is ours" in the service of the satisfaction of a need that was not or not sufficiently met by the market.

While the founder's mindset is generally well-focused in the early development of an activity, it can tend to dissipate as the adventure progresses with the growth, professionalization and complexity of the organization.

Logically, the organization becomes structured as it develops. While such structuring has many advantages, it potentially threatens the durability of this founding mindset.

Have we been able to retain, or even adapt, the mentality of our founder, marked by a conquering spirit and a real proximity to the reality of our markets and our customers?

To what extent does Altrad benefit (mostly) from its scale and growth?

To what extent does the sophistication and professionalism of our organization deprive us of the agility and closeness to our markets that we need to remain in tune with our clients' needs and requirements?

At what point do we run the risk of becoming disconnected when most of our energy is devoted to the administration of our company to the detriment of our market reality?

The following table, which lists the threats to the founder's mindset, also considers some courses of action.

20. Allen, "Founder's mentality".

Threats	What to do about it?
Bureaucracy Complication of our organization and decision-making processes	Create the conditions for simplicity.
Dilution of our culture Loss of focus on our values, less adherence to the Group's narrative	Rediscover the founding spirit by reaffirming, reactivating or even adapting our values and culture.
Dispersal of our efforts or misallocation of our resources Waste of energy and means, lack of clarity in strategic priorities	Strategically allocate our resources and focus on the business(es) that are in line with our <i>raison d'être</i> .
Insufficient business plans Loss of sight of what is essential, important and prioritized	Identify precisely what is really important, where the prospects for growth lie, and the human, financial, technical and organizational resources that we need to gather/implement to achieve our objectives.

In practical terms, what can business leaders, whoever they may be, do to create and sustain optimism?

Certainly,

- embody confidence in the company and its future;
- give meaning to action (ambition, responsibility, justice);
- free action from its constraints (demand for immediate success, intolerance of trial and error, lack of means and resources, definition of unrealistic objectives, complication of processes and multiplication of procedures, etc.);
- aim for success without fear of mistakes and temporary, limited failures;
- create the conditions for the resilience of individuals, teams and the organization;
- surround yourself with people who are able to uphold confidence in the periods of doubt and adversity that everyone will experience at some point;
- question what undermines one's own optimism;
- opt for a discourse that is sincere, nuanced, measured and inspiring.

Jean-Luc Hudry, a manager and speaker, refers to seven principles of “operational optimism”.²¹ The table below lists them and considers some concrete courses of action.

7 principles	Detrimental effects of excessive optimism or pessimism	Actions
Too much positive kills the positive	Denial of reality Lack of lucidity Disempowerment	Don't hide reality: state the facts and put them into perspective, relativize. Don't ignore the risk: anticipate it, evaluate it, announce it and prepare for it.

21. Jean-Luc Hudry, “7 principes d’optimisme qui ont sauvé une entreprise”, *expectra*, 20 January 2020: <https://www.expectra.fr/blog/vie-au-travail/7-principes-doptimisme-qui-ont-sauve-une-entreprise/>.

Optimism invented the airplane, pessimism invented the parachute	Too much optimism makes people lose credibility Too much pessimism prevents action	Paradox: in small doses, pessimism encourages optimism. Deal with risk: stay alert and aware of market developments, regulations and societal trends.
Facts first	Confusing facts and interpretation of facts leads to decisions that are potentially out of touch with reality	Get back to the facts. Clarify and state what you think the facts are. Be aware of the feelings that our perception of the facts generate. Recognize that our thoughts, feelings and behaviour influence each other. Adopt a rigorous analysis.
Think differently	Thinking that there is one absolute truth excludes the consideration of different points of view Not questioning our practices when they do not produce the desired effects and yet expecting a different result condemns us to relive what we want to avoid	Be willing to revisit our ways of doing things. Consider that mistakes are part of the learning and development process, just like success. Encourage creativity. Make new decisions and test their effects. Be inspired by what works elsewhere, test it and adapt it to our environment.
Avoid the chronic pessimist	Pessimism, like optimism, is “contagious”. Surrounding yourself with people who primarily take a pessimistic view of the world can be burdensome	Welcome the pessimistic view as a way to anticipate what might go wrong. Don't limit yourself to this pessimistic vision and complement it with a more positive vision.
Think “solution” rather than “problem”	Focusing only on what is wrong, on the problems, leaves out part of the reality	Solving a problem involves recognizing the problem (knowing that it exists, qualifying it, defining it), assuming everyone's share of responsibility in the emergence and/or maintenance of the problem, and inventing new solutions that will not only act on the problem itself but also on the context that encourages its emergence/
Between two illusions, choose the right one	Thinking that an optimistic view or a pessimistic view describes THE truth leads to a partial and biased reading of the situation	Optimism and pessimism are two “illusions”, two ways of understanding the world. They do not, on their own, capture the whole truth, which is necessarily plural and complex. Use either of these perceptions strategically.

The dynamism and positivism of one man or woman is undoubtedly paramount. However, they need to be complemented by others – and trained in the culture – so that a climate of trust, which is the cement and soil for constructive relationships, can permeate the organization and reach the tipping point where it is possible to move people to action.

TEAM COMMITMENT

*In life, there are no solutions.
There are forces at work: you have to create them,
and the solutions will follow.*
ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *Night Flight*

Many observers, from experts to novices, would no doubt agree: we are living in an era of extremes, what some would more readily call crises: energy, financial, food, environmental, climatic, geopolitical crises, etc.

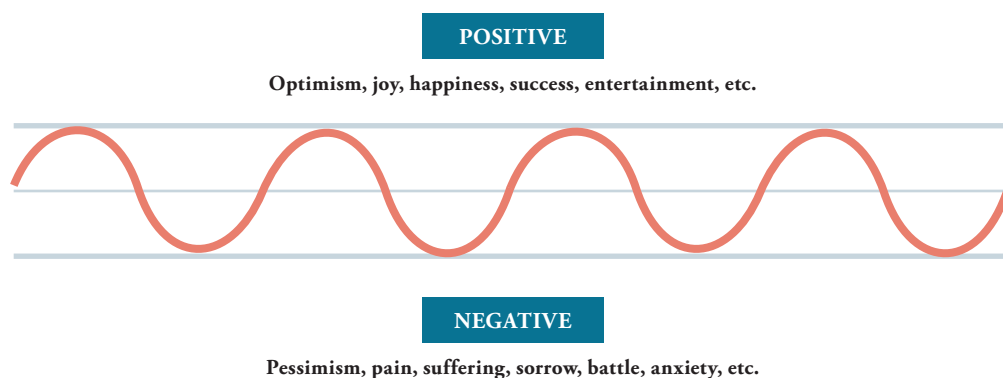
While the world is constantly changing, it is sometimes subject to transformations of greater scope, intensity and speed. Developments that had previously taken place quietly suddenly come to light, revealing a moment of chaos, that is, a moment of modification of pre-existing balances and the emergence of new balances whose contours are still difficult to read or understand.

These periods of what could be deemed chaos are necessary for a new order to be established. In this moment of transition from chaos to a new form of coherence, many points of reference are undermined. The adoption of new paradigms (that is, visions and representations of the world) is necessary because they are the consequence of these transformations and because they make it possible to give meaning to the new organization of the world.

Instability, by definition, disrupts reference points. With it comes a growing sense of uncertainty about a future that seems less predictable. Indeed, when changes are slow and marginal, each day looks (more or less) like the previous one, creating the illusion of stability and a predictable future. The more numerous, significant or rapid the changes, the more difficult it seems to anticipate the future. The probability that events will unfold as predicted decreases with increasing chaos. Predictions are less reliable. Uncertainty increases and with it, fear.

This is perhaps one of the reasons why the science of happiness is so popular with both individuals and organizations.

Schematically, the latter are spread along a continuum that goes from positive to negative (or vice versa). The diagram below represents this continuum as a sine curve, showing the alternating states that individuals and organizations experience, oscillating from positive to negative according to the situations to which they are exposed.



Resilience, which we mentioned earlier, is the ability of a physical body to return to its previous state. This ability is also referred to as “bouncing back”.

As highlighted above, for a human being and the organizations they are part of, the state after bouncing back is never identical to the previous state either the person:

- or the organization subjected to a disruption, to stress, is affected in such a way that they cannot cope with the change. Unable to adapt, total destruction (death, permanent breakdown) ensues;
- or the person or organization subjected to a disturbance or stress manages to cope with the change and restore a new state in which a new existence is possible. This is what Professor Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls anti-fragility.²²

Unlike brittle bodies (like glass), which break when subjected to sufficient stress, anti-fragile bodies not only resist, but can even transform and benefit from the volatility and shocks to which they have been exposed (for example a muscle that is exercised undergoes repeated stress, as a result of which it becomes stronger). This idea is summed up by Nietzsche’s maxim “What does not kill me makes me stronger”.

The notion of anti-fragility is not the same as being robust (able to survive a shock or stress better than a fragile body). It conveys the idea that there are bodies that benefit from the disturbances they face. This would lead to the iconoclastic idea that some bodies “prefer” volatility to tranquillity, disorder to order.

From a psychological point of view, an individual subjected to stress or trauma – that is, to a situation that they perceive as such – may:

- develop a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
- or develop post-traumatic growth (PTG).

The idea that hardship and difficulty can lead to positive personal and societal change is not new in itself. Literature is full of stories of heroes who emerge victorious and grow through the challenges they face.

Emerging in the 1990s, the notion of post-traumatic growth assumes that even the most significant challenges, the most severe disruptions, can be followed by a constructive response.²³ It does not deny the physical or moral distress that accompanies such challenges. Nevertheless, supported by research in the psychological field, it testifies to a unique and singular capacity for many individuals to learn and grow in times of great adversity.

Tedeschi and Calhoun define post-traumatic growth as “the positive psychological changes that follow a struggle against highly challenging life experiences”. According to these authors, statistically, post-traumatic growth is even twice as likely to occur as post-traumatic stress, provided that:

- it is known that this option of growth after a trauma exists;
- that the conditions for its probability of occurrence are met, knowing that the result is never 100% guaranteed.

22. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile, Things that Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House, 2012).

23. Richard G. Tedeschi, Jane Shakespeare-Finch, Kanako Taku, Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Posttraumatic Growth: Theory, Research, and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

Our aim is therefore to reflect on and propose some initial courses of action in order to identify the conditions in which a form of optimism can develop and growth can result from difficult, even trying, experiences.

This implies:

- agreeing to modify our perceptions in order to open ourselves up to different representations of reality (what we call realities). Let us remember here that consciousness creates our life experiences;
- strategically setting up organizational and relationship conditions that support a climate of confidence in ourselves, in others and in the future;
- avoiding the pitfalls of excessive optimism (which would lead to an erroneous representation of reality and the minimization of risks) or the use of optimism in the practice of an abusive management style.

In other words, how can we commit, each of us, each of our teams, to a reasoned optimism that can create the conditions for ecologically positive action for all the actors in the system and the system itself?

The conditions for optimism and resilience

*Reality is only an illusion,
albeit a very persistent one.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

Tal Ben-Shahar, author and professor of positive psychology, reminds us that resilience and anti-fragility do not mean “invulnerability”, quite the contrary. He sets out a series of conditions that can promote general well-being, or even a certain development following a life or professional challenge).

Condition #1 Permission to be human

Embrace, accept our emotions, all our emotions

Welcoming an emotion does not mean succumbing to it. It means identifying the emotion for what it is, admitting that it has a psychological and physiological function, allowing it to express itself so as not to block its course or compromise the biological functions at work.

Buddhists talk about two levels of suffering:

- a first level, which is inevitable, following a bereavement, a grief related to friends or lovers, etc. (major life challenges);
- a second level, which is avoidable, following a personal choice to reject the negative and undesirable emotion, and its intensity.

The paradox of happiness, well-being and optimism is that their foundation implies the acceptance of misfortune, unhappiness and pessimism. In other words, the acceptance of our human dimension, that is, of all emotions, none of which is in itself positive or negative.

It is accompanied by another paradox: the more “it” resists, the more “it” insists; the more “it” insists, the more “it” resists.

The permission to be human (that is, both strong and weak, vulnerable and resistant, knowledgeable and ignorant, etc.) therefore presupposes a form of sincerity with regard not only to our complexity but also to what we feel, what we experience.

<p>Condition #2 The necessary time to recover</p>	<p>Introduce periods of physical and psychological recovery into our lives</p> <p>Life is marked by alternating states of stress (activation of the orthosympathetic system), recovery (activation of the parasympathetic system) and calm (a “neutral” state).</p> <p>Stress becomes chronic when our body or mind is subjected to continuous stress and cannot recover, whether it is a physical or psychological stress.</p> <p>To avoid the development of a state of chronic stress – stress which has major harmful effects on our health – it is essential to set aside time for recovery.</p> <p>Maintaining a balance between stress and recovery, and favouring periods of calm, is a question of survival and quality of life, both for individuals and for organizations.</p>
<p>Condition #3 The quality of our relationships</p>	<p>Creating and maintaining quality relationships</p> <p>We are social beings, beings of relationships. The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our existence.</p> <p>What is more, our relationships are the number one predictor of our well-being, health and post-traumatic growth.</p> <p>The fear of dying (socially or materially) or suffering (psychologically or physically) dictates many of our decisions and actions. While fear protects us in the face of real and immediate danger, its effects are detrimental. It is the most destructive energy and leads to a considerable, if not total, loss of power.</p> <p>Evolution is not a competition but a cooperative process.</p> <p>Sincere, supportive, caring, deep (as opposed to superficial), real and three-dimensional relationships are essential for our balance and development. They protect us against the invasion of fear into our thoughts and lives.</p> <p>Schematically presented, the ability to express gratitude, for oneself, others and life, elicits emotions of joy and pleasure which in turn translate into biochemical cocktails that reduce stress and restore a state of inner calm, allowing us to move beyond immediate difficulties and look to the future with greater optimism.</p>
<p>Condition #4 The sense of purpose</p>	<p>Feeling useful</p> <p>Finding meaning and purpose in one’s life.</p> <p>One of the characteristics of depression and depressive states is to feel worthless. Another way of defining depression is to identify it with a deep sadness devoid of hope.</p> <p>Feeling useful, knowing that our actions have meaning, that they have a future, that our contributions make a difference, helps to maintain a level of hope and optimism, which in turn affects commitment.</p> <p>Although not the same as effectiveness, utility is related to it.</p> <p>In a Western sense, effectiveness results from the ability to fit reality into an abstract goal that one has constructed, conceptualized.</p> <p>In the East, effectiveness is understood more as the ability to accompany an existing movement, to seize opportunities.</p> <p>An unrealistic, unattainable objective is detrimental to effectiveness and consequently to the feeling of usefulness.</p>

Condition #5 Self-care and caring	<p>Taking care of oneself</p> <p>Taking care of oneself does not mean being selfish, provided it is not to the detriment of others and the care we give to others.</p> <p>Knowing your limits and respecting them, not hurting yourself, meeting your desires and aspirations, nurturing your creativity ... that is what taking care of yourself is all about.</p> <p>Following Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829), we propose considering evolution as a creation. Those who survive are those who choose to live in harmony with nature and all living things.</p> <p>Our biology is not designed to be subjected to frequent or continuous stress (see recovery time). The responsibility of each individual, and consequently of organizations and their leaders, is to create the conditions for reducing stress and increasing calm, which is synonymous with mental and physical health.</p> <p>An organism under acute or permanent stress loses its ability to look at the situation with hindsight and the future with optimism. It substitutes agitation (disordered action) for strategic and intentional action.</p> <p>Taking care of oneself is, paradoxically, also taking care of others. It is not possible to love (and therefore respect) others if we do not love ourselves. Loving oneself means developing compassion for oneself.</p>
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Translating these principles to the company context

For a strategic approach to the relationship capable of creating the conditions for the emergence and maintenance of optimism

Conditions	Changes in our perceptions Renunciations	Action points Skills to be developed
<p>Permission to be human Embracing and accepting our emotions, all our emotions.</p>	<p>Renouncing the illusion of an “economic person” who does not respond to the natural laws of biology and psychology.</p> <p>Renounce the implicit prohibition of emotion in the company (for the record, etymologically, emotion is what allows us to get moving) coupled, here is the paradox, with the injunction to change (spirit of competition, efficiency) in a context of “undifferentiated” loyalty and transparency.</p> <p>Stop feeling obliged to “be happy”, “be in a good mood”, “be optimistic”, paradoxically accompanied by the injunction to be authentic and sincere (“be authentic but do not live your emotions”).</p>	<p>Learn about normalization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the world of organizations is a human world and therefore subject to the laws of biology and psychology. <p>Learn to deal with paradoxes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the attempt to establish organizations free of suffering generates suffering; • any complex system brings together contradictory, ambivalent and paradoxical elements that we must learn to make coexist in a tension, in a never-ending balance. <p>Learn to question our way of understanding human resource management:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what are our expectations and demands of each other? • are they compatible with the sustainability of the individual and the company? • do we embody our values and our ambition? • what dissonance do we generate, and therefore what suffering, when we create the conditions for a gap between the ideal and the representation/experience as perceived by each person?

		<p>Learning to deal with uncertainty, to consent to life.</p> <p>Learning to confront in order not to avoid, to accept. (Michel de Montaigne “He who fears suffering already suffers from what he fears”)</p>
<p>The necessary time to recover Introducing periods of physical and psychological recovery into our lives.</p>	<p>Give up the illusion that productivity is defined by a total use of available time. Time for rest and daydreaming is an integral part of the production and creation process.</p> <p>To function properly, the brain must have time to “switch off” to allow for integration, imagination and innovation. The same is true for the body.</p> <p>Alternating between challenging, rewarding and restful periods both physically and psychologically contributes to balance and health (mental and physical).</p>	<p>Question the management of our projects their scope, their frequency, their sequence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • celebrating our successes; • learning from our failures. <p>Question our relationship to productivity and efficiency.</p> <p>Learn to take time, to slow down and to consider this recovery time as an integral part of the productive and creative process.</p>
<p>The quality of our relationships Creating and maintaining quality relationships.</p>	<p>Give up the belief that management is based on a single, historically mainly authoritarian, relational mode. Give up the belief that good government is government by fear. On the contrary, managing implies taking into consideration the different elements that colour the relationship: who talks to whom, when, where, for what? Is it still possible to manage today as we did a few decades ago? The level of education, awareness and aspirations of people has evolved.</p>	<p>Learn to develop and implement a differentiated, situational and relational leadership that embodies the values of the Altrad Group.</p> <p>Learn to depend on others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to be in debt is to be connected. In an organization that is by definition complex, everyone is interdependent (debts and receivables) with others. Accepting to be in a relationship means accepting to cooperate. For the record, cooperation is the primary condition for evolution and survival; • notion of the “servant leader”, whatever leadership position we are talking about, at the service of others (employees, associates, peers, clients) of society and of the planet. <p>Learn to listen: to implement active listening, in the service of the development of people, ideas and activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enable individuals to feel recognized and valued. People who feel listened to develop a healthy sense of self and self-esteem; • listening can be contagious (the phenomenon of mirror neurons and mimetic behaviour) and infuse the whole organization.

<p>The sense of purpose Feeling useful</p>	<p>Give up the belief:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that we know better than others what is good for them, a humiliating position that leads to disempowerment, and therefore to disengagement, as a result of which we may feel useless or of little use, which is detrimental to action; • that effectiveness is measured only by our ability to impose our vision and desires on reality; • that productivity and success are devoid of trial and error; • abandon the success/failure binarity and allow the notion of success to emerge, that is, the recognition of mistakes made and the acceptance that the goal set was unattainable. Ben-Shahar speaks of optimalism: striving towards a goal combined with accepting the possibility of failure (potentially temporary). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Give yourself) access to projects that make sense to you, others, the Altrad Group and the world. • Create the conditions for a sense of understanding and coherence between the situation in which we find ourselves, the means at our disposal and the result we seek to achieve. • Define realistic and achievable objectives (even if they are ambitious) and whose progress can be measured almost daily develop everyone's skills. • Proportional powers (starting with the power to decide on the means and resources needed to carry out the tasks for which we are responsible) and responsibilities. • Accept that any creative process, any action undertaken for the first time (either because it is new, or because the context in which it is implemented is new) is an iterative process which requires daring (trying what we don't yet know will work) and successive adjustments. • Create an indicator of trust and commitment internally.
<p>Self-care and caring Taking care of oneself</p>	<p>Give up the belief that taking care of oneself:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is at the expense of others; • has no place in the company. <p>Renounce perfectionism and the search for the unattainable and favour the search for gradual and progressive excellence.</p>	<p>Learn to relate to oneself and to others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • invest time in professional relationships and friendships to break the isolation and loneliness that can lead to depression; • develop a sense of humour to distance oneself from situations (not to take everything personally) and recover a capacity for action. <p>Learn to betray:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choose your loyalties. Don't allow yourself to be trapped in inextricable conflicts of loyalty. One cannot be loyal to everyone, to everything, all the time; • agree to step away from one's expertise in order to evolve within the Group; • agree to unlearn what we knew and which was useful elsewhere or before, in order to be able to adopt new ways of acting better adapted to the current environment. <p>Learn to lose, to no longer have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • accept to give up what is in the way; • mourn what is no longer, what cannot be maintained, in order to move forward; • learn to take responsibility for oneself, to be an actor in one's life; • learn to acknowledge uncomfortable emotions in order to overcome them.

For a strategic approach to uncertainty and volatility: anti-fragility and team commitment

We live in an unpredictable world. The models and theories we develop aim to create certainty and predictability in order to help us take decisions.

Unlike nature, which demonstrates its capacity to adapt to the various events to which it is subjected, human beings try to control these events, in particular by developing models, rules and procedures, with the aim of reducing the unforeseen, the shocks that could jeopardize our survival.

However, the recent crises we have experienced remind us that the future does not always meet our expectations and forecasts. Unforeseen events punctuate history and undermine the decisions we have made, plans we have drawn up and beliefs we hold.

In the face of uncertainty, it is possible to develop two diametrically opposed attitudes:

- an attitude of fear, in which we develop a strategy of refusing uncertainty and maximizing control in order to reduce or eliminate the unexpected;
- an attitude of confidence in which we implement a strategy of acceptance of uncertainty and flexibility to deal with the unexpected.

Paradoxically, the more we try to control what is by definition beyond our control, the more we lose control and become fragile. Moreover, the time and energy we expend in predicting the future is diverted from learning skills and developing alternative strategies that can help us seize unexpected opportunities as they arise.

For systemicists, one of the solutions to this problem lies in our ability to accept and deal with uncertainty.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb refers to the notion of anti-fragility as a substitute for the endless search for (i) more accurate models and (ii) more reliable predictions. The proposal is to put oneself in a position to benefit from uncertainty and volatility

For him,

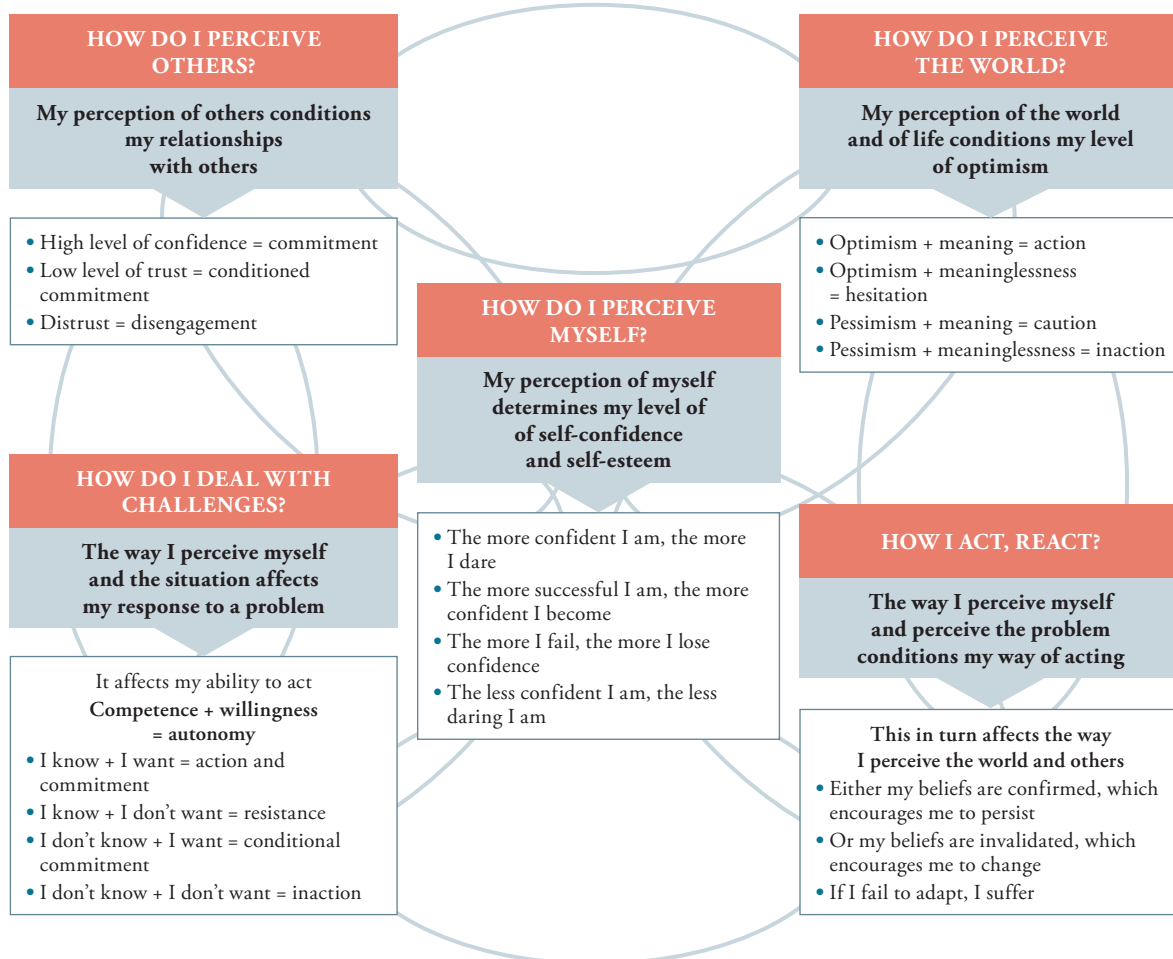
- The opposite of fragility is not robustness, but anti-fragility:
 - what is fragile (porcelain vase, non-diversified portfolio) can break easily. Fragility implies that one has more to lose than to gain,
 - what is robust (a piece of metal, a highly diversified portfolio) survives change,
 - what is anti-fragile (a portfolio of options, a “post-traumatic growth” mentality) benefits from change. Anti-fragility assumes that one has more to gain than to lose;
- paradoxically, the removal of randomness and volatility weakens complex systems;
- absence of evidence is not evidence of absence;
- accumulation of data creates noise and confuses understanding more than it illuminates;
- reference to the worst historical events (the worst is in the past) creates a false sense of confidence in the future;
- the possibility of a total loss of any investment should be minimized . It is important to avoid betting, even if it looks like a winning bet with a high return;
- it is important not to be misled by the source of the information you refer to. Not all sources and information have the same degree of reliability and do not inform the decision equally;
- a significant part of what people know or think they know is not useful. Reference to ancient words and books of wisdom is fundamental;

- “subtractive” knowledge is reliable; “additive” knowledge is fragile. What is powerful, often, is knowing what we should not do, what we should refrain from doing. Sometimes doing nothing is the right decision.

For a strategic approach to optimism and well-being: by and for team engagement

Team commitment is a function of several factors that play a role at different levels and to different degrees in the decision to act.

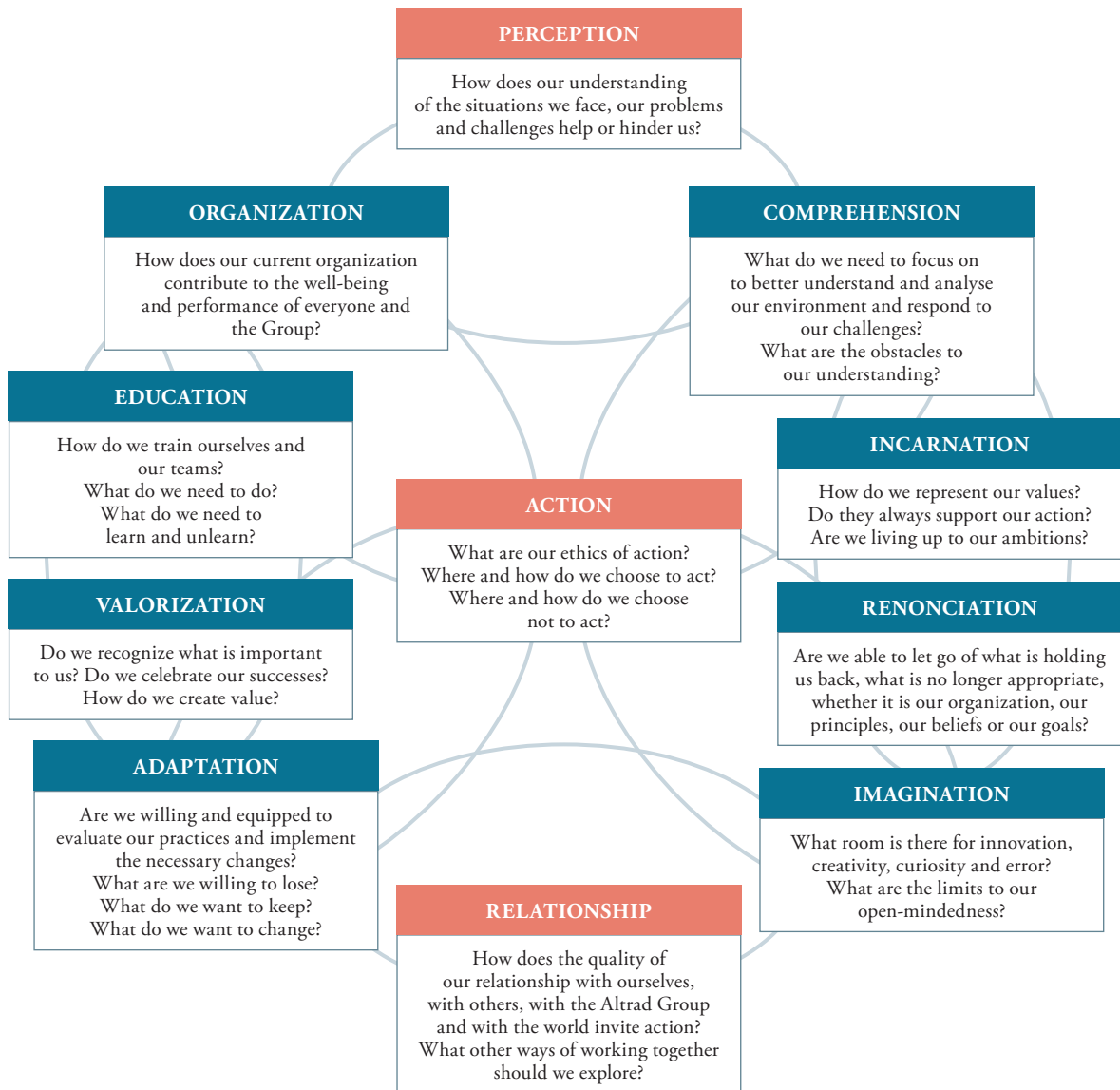
The diagram below illustrates how each person’s perception of themselves, of others and of the world influences their relationship with difficulties and challenges and consequently their propensity to act. Everything acts and reacts to everything else, in a multitude of feedback loops, where causes produce effects, which then have a retroactive effect on the causes, causing new effects.



Commitment is essential for action. Beyond this tautology and the above, what levers can be used to generate support for the project and the will to act?

This paper has explored at length the importance of optimism as a virtuous process, creating both the means for action (release of energy) and the meaning of action (a future is possible).

There are many avenues that can be explored as ways to engage and enable others to engage in action.



Our April 2023 seminar will be a great opportunity to continue the reflection started here.



CONCLUSION

*The only job where you never get bored
is the one you don't do.*

ALAIN

What makes us do things? What sets us in motion? Why do we do what we do? What for? Is our ability to act spontaneous or proactive? What environments, what states of mind encourage us to get moving?

By understanding what fosters commitment, and by adopting a strategic approach to this commitment (through encouragement, support, and allowing people to carry out their tasks) we can develop skills that serve:

- the performance, growth and resilience of our teams and the Altrad Group;
- the development of confidence in oneself, in others and in the future.

Optimism is a sign of vitality and is a driving force for action. Creating the conditions for its emergence and deployment is part of the ethics of action.

In adopting this point of view, we should not forget that existence is, by definition, ambivalent in that it includes the certain and the uncertain, the fragile and the anti-fragile, success and failure, happiness and unhappiness, the positive and the negative, optimism and pessimism, enthusiasm and boredom.

“How happy I would be if I were happy!” This Woody Allen phrase perhaps expresses the essential: that we are separated from happiness by the very hope involved in pursuing it. We would be wise to live, instead of hoping to live. This echoes the lessons of Epicurus, the Stoics, Spinoza or, in the East, the Buddha. Our happiness is a measure of the despair we are able to overcome. Wisdom is this very thing: “happiness, desperately”.²⁴

24. André Comte-Sponville, *Le Bonheur, désespérément* (Paris: Edition J'ai Lu, 2018).



NARRATIVES



CONTINUATION OF THE 2022 STORY

THE TEMPTATION OF TRUST

The characters

- The child
- The old woman (the grandmother)
- The teacher
- The wife and children of the teacher
- The father and his sons

The locations

- The old woman's tent in the desert
- The school and the teacher's house
The secondary school in Damascus

I go back to school ...

Looking back at the boy in shabby trousers that he was, sitting on the school bench, he smiles. At his daring. At his ambition. At his carefree attitude. At his recklessness?

His heart is filled with gratitude. Towards the teenager he met on the banks of the Euphrates. He had never imagined that people could be kind. To him. And could speak to him with respect and friendliness. Toward the strangers who braved the cousin's fury and took him to Dura Europos. And arranged for him to meet Ibn Rahman. To Ibn Rahman who, through his words of wisdom and knowledge, sowed the seeds of the first step of his plan of action. Going back to school. Despite the mockery. Despite the bullying. Despite the beatings. Back to school. Immersing himself in books and emerging from those timeless moments of reading with a mind full of knowledge, a head brimming with questions, a heart hungrier than ever. The hardest part, thinking back, was taming his impatience. That beast with its restless energy, forever tormenting him and making his mind race ahead. Making him wish that time could take to its feet and run.

He remembers his father's attempts to send him back to his cousin. It took all the teacher's persuasive powers to get the grandmother to agree to take him in for a while. The conversation before leaving her tent:

— May Allah protect you, old woman. Our Almighty God is grateful to you for having begotten such a promising lineage. He knows that your good care is not foreign to the learning facilities of your grandson. He knows that the goat's milk you give him and the dates you share with him help him to study better. Allah knows how to recognize those who help Him fulfil His plan.

The grandmother was pouting. Her eyes were silently questioning the teacher's speech. She hadn't understood a word. Only that she was important in the eyes of Allah. That was enough for her.

The child had listened, perplexed. Was the teacher too blind to see the abuse, the insults and the loneliness that his grandmother imposed on him? The child began to doubt his teacher, and his intelligence. But he quickly changed his mind when the grandmother answered:

— One more year. Not a day more.

One year is fine, said the teacher. That will be enough.

He had turned back to the child, giving him a private smile out of the old woman's sight, and added:

— Perhaps your grandson could stay with my wife and me during the week? I know how much a child's meals cost. He will share ours. It will be easier for you. And you will take him back on Fridays. For prayers. What do you think?

The old woman was still pouting. It was true, she would no longer have to share her meagre meals and bitter tea. But she still wasn't getting rid of the child. Not entirely. She sighed.

— If I really must.

The clever teacher praised her. For her sense of sacrifice. For her generosity. Agreeing to be separated from the child would be hard for her, no doubt ...

The old woman said no more.

— Unbelievable! In a few words, the teacher had arranged for him to study for another year. And for him to stay at his house! Not all the time, of course, but even so. A year! A year of studying, writing, poetry, recitations, verses. A year of reading. The words he knew and those yet to discover circled around him. It made him giddy to think about it.

— What about the goats? asked the grandmother, as if she was coming back to her senses.

— The goats?

— Yes. His father's goats. Who will look after them if he goes to school every day?

The teacher had turned to the child, at a loss.

— I look after my father's goats. That's why I don't come to school every day. But I want to go to school!

— It's for your father to decide!

— Your grandmother is right. It's your father's decision.

Goodbye ambitions and building cities. The child already regretted the teacher's false promise. He was angry at himself for having believed it. He knew, however, that adults were liars and mean-spirited.

— It is for the father to decide, you are right, continued the teacher. But isn't Allah the father of us all? The one who guides our steps, our souls and our hearts? The one we try to live up to? The one we strive to glorify on earth? Is it not to this Father that we all owe obedience?

The old woman sighed. Too many words in the teacher's sentences! And why was he talking about Allah again? The matter was closed. The child would go and tend the goats. That's how it had been. And that's how it would be. Forever.

No more escapades and dreams of grandeur! Who did he think he was? Study. And then what? And why not leave the desert, the family, as he had already tried to do? No chance of that! He would do what he was ordered to do. That's how it is: children must obey. That's all there is to it! He was already lucky that she and the cousin were taking care of him. And that his father had given him a job. What was he thinking? That you could eat without earning your bread?

The teacher resumed:

— How well I understand you! It is up to each of us to fulfil our duty on earth. And His destiny, he added. And to make the best use of it.

— Exactly! croaked the old woman.

— The wisdom of Allah is unfathomable, as is His will. But I know that He recognizes those of us who work for His glory. You are one of them ...

The wind had died down. The heat was suffocating. Foreheads glistened with sweat. The conversation seemed unending. Would he be able to go to school in the end? His child's heart and mind were filled with doubt.

— You are a daughter of Allah. For you have allowed the child to learn from the desert, from you, and from his father's goats. And you also allowed him to find the way to school. Your good care allowed his body to get stronger every day when the sun and the sand tested his tenacity and endurance. And for his mind to receive the teachings. Those of the Bedouins and my own, more humble teachings.

The old woman had pursed her lips, her head cocked to one side, revealing a toothless mouth. Nevertheless, she was basking in the compliments. In her tent they were rare. She savoured them.

— Your righteousness and your severity, perhaps, sometimes kept him on the right path.

Severity? Oh no! She wasn't strict enough. The proof: the child had tried to escape. A runaway! Across the desert! To talk to an old fool who had filled his head with nonsense!

Yet the teacher's words had shaken her certainty. She was flattered by the teacher's praise. That was enough. She let her guard down. Once again.

The child didn't know what to think. His heart and mind rejoiced and despaired in turn. He had listened to the rest of the conversation, curious and anxious.

— But wasn't it time for him to go into the classroom, really, rather than listening surreptitiously, from outside? If he could hear everything properly, the boy would study faster, and he would have more time to help you ...

The still wind, which usually blew at this time of day, seemed to be waiting for the old woman's decision.

— Who are we, poor mortals, humble nomads, to oppose the plans of the Most High? Who are we? The teacher was almost shouting.

The old woman was silent. She didn't dare look up. She feared no one. Her wickedness was her armour, formidable and impenetrable. But Allah ...

— No! Never! Never will I risk opposing His will. For I know that my duty, the one I have sworn to honour before Him, obliges me. This is my destiny: to teach. To educate

the children of kings and the children with nothing. All children. I will not fail Him. I will not arouse His wrath. And I would not want my cowardice to harm you.

— The teacher seemed agitated. He was miming, as the child now realized, fear, anger and submission, to better convince the old woman.

— She looked at him with contempt. But also with concern. He had read books. He went to the mosque. He knew things she didn't know. What if, through inadvertence or ignorance, she stirred the wrath of Allah? Cautiously, she proposed:

— I will speak to his father. But I warn you. The child's a good-for-nothing. You're wasting your time.

— May Allah help me find the way! And turn the stone into gold.

— Gold?! It's nothing but pebbles! His head is as hard as a rock. Look at him! A rascal, that's what he is.

— We'll both be credited for this!

— That's it! Take him off my hands! Get on with it! I've got things to do.

The old woman had turned and disappeared into the tent. Suddenly a thin bundle was thrown out onto the sand. Go away! And come back on Friday for prayers, and for the goats.

— Go! Good riddance! And may Allah protect me!

The child picked up his bag, the seams of which were touching each other, so little did it contain. The teacher took his hand. He felt the warmth of his palm despite the roughness of the skin.

— Come on, let's go. It will soon be dark and we want to be back in time for the evening meal.

As with the strangers, he was leaving once again. In a hurry. Without planning to. And with trust. In whom? A great person or in his own intuition? As with the strangers, he felt that this departure was filled with hope. And he gambled on this crazy hope. He believed that another destiny was possible, in spite of everything he had experienced so far. He was leaving. With no regrets. Because, like the strangers, the teacher was opening up a new chapter, a new path, a new possibility.

The child was overjoyed. A meal! School! The teacher was determined to pass on his knowledge. To welcome him, even! He felt dizzy, like when the sun beat down so hard, so directly, that his neck still felt the blow after dark.

He was so excited that his thoughts were racing and joy was pounding in his heart. The sound was infernal. He had already forgotten the old woman grumbling inside the tent. He only wanted to think about tomorrow. Even though he knew that the following Friday he would be back. A short moment in the infinite course his life was taking.

He was dreaming. Awake.

The dream was lasting far beyond his expectations. The elementary school, built from desert clay, had been followed by secondary school.

Now, through the glass panes of his bedroom window, scratched by the sand that sometimes swept through the streets of Damascus, he could see the domes and, in the distance, from time to time, a cloud of sand. The desert was never far away. Today, sleeping in a bed felt natural to him. But that first night at the teacher's house, he couldn't get to sleep. The thick mat that had been rolled out on the floor for him was so much more comfortable than the one he slept on at the cousin's or the stones in the old woman's tent,

that his body had not been able to relax. By the third night, his habits had given in to fatigue. Now he could fall asleep anywhere. Moreover, the teacher had congratulated him on his ability to adapt.

The teacher's house was very close to the school. All it took was a short climb up a stony hill. It was nothing like the journey he used to make secretly to school from the old woman's tent. On the way, one morning, the teacher had said to him:

- That was then. This is now. And that's how it is. Tomorrow will be different.
- In what way different? the child asked.
- No one can predict that. Different or the same, similar or otherwise. Who knows?
- What will I do, then, if it changes again? If it changes all the time?
- You'll manage. Because it will change. And you won't have the choice.
- But what if I can't?
- You will.
- How can we be sure? We can't know, because it hasn't happened yet.
- That's right, it hasn't. It hasn't happened yet. But I have faith.
- In what?
- Not in what. In who. I trust you. In your ability to adapt.

The child stood, lost in thought, with the teacher's hand resting on his shoulder. Yes, of course, he had got used to life in the teacher's house. Sleeping next to his children. It hadn't been easy at first. But the teacher had said that from now on he would live with them on school days. And that they had to be nice to him. They weren't. The children didn't even speak to him to begin with. They just asked him to step aside when he was blocking their way. Or when he got in their way around the work table during homework. He finally got used to their indifference. He recognized it. It wasn't so different from that of the old woman, the father or the cousin. Less mean though.

No, what had bothered him the most was the teacher's wife. Because of her smiles. It frightened him. He didn't understand. He didn't know how to react. She held out her hand. He stepped back. She tried to stroke his cheek. He protected his face. She gave him milk with honey. He waited for the others to drink before taking his turn. She tucked the blanket up around his neck. He eluded her, to avoid being smothered.

It had taken him a long time, a very long time, to accept her attentions and kindness. To accept her pancakes and dried fruit. To accept her scrubbing his back when he washed by the well. To accept her kissing him goodnight. To accept her. And to accept himself differently. Vulnerable and anxious at the thought of losing the small trickle of love that flowed over him. He hated his own weakness as much as he impatiently awaited her soft kiss on his cheek. He feared that each caress would imprison him a little more and make the inevitable separation even more painful. The memory of his mother drifted like mist through his mind.

Trust ... The word was often spoken by the teacher in their conversations on the way to school. It was attractive yet frightening. The child felt how sweet it would be to curl up in a relationship filled with trust. There was a nascent serenity, a breath of calm, a wave of optimism.

But as soon as he felt he was surrendering, he was seized with anxiety. His stomach churned, as it did on the nights when the old woman forgot to share her dinner; his back tensed and his neck stiffened.

Count only on myself, he repeated to himself. Only on me. On me. On me.

Too reckless. Too careless. Too gullible. That's what he kept telling himself, over and over, to resist. Don't give in to temptation. Don't say yes to tenderness, or attachment. In the smile of the teacher's wife he saw a bewitching dancer whose veils brushed his skin to better intoxicate him.

Don't drop your guard. So as not to suffer. The pain never quite leaves the body. It doesn't forget. Not really. Don't wake the beast. Don't feed it out of naivety. Don't believe that things can be different. To convince himself, he remembered the children's bullying, the old woman's insults, the Fatma's venom and the father's sarcasm. And things would return to normal. For a while.

Yet he had to admit that something had changed in him. Since his meeting with the teenager and the sandstorm that had kept him locked inside with the two strangers. Since his meeting with the wise man. Since that day when he had followed the other children and arrived at the school. Leaning against the wall, out of sight, he had listened to the lesson, the recitations and the calculations.

The weeks spent at the teacher's house had a marked effect on him. A breach had opened up. He could no longer see the world as he had before. Even his future had changed. At least as he imagined it. Now it was possible to believe it was possible.

He often thought about all this, sitting on a rock, watching the sun go down. He enjoyed this moment of solitude before the teacher's wife came to tell him it was bedtime. One day he agreed to put his hand in hers and let himself be guided home in the dark. Since then, it had become a ritual. A sweet, comforting habit. It was getting harder and harder not to give in to temptation. He did give in to it.

The teacher had given him a little notebook. It was a bit dog-eared. With a string to hold the pages together. So that he could write down whatever he wanted.

On the first page he had written some names: the teenager he met on the banks of the Euphrates, the strangers, Ibn Rahman, the teacher and his wife. There was still room for more.

He carried his notebook everywhere. After he left the teacher's house, no other names had been added.

The old woman, the father and the cousin had to recognize the facts. Without him, the goats were no worse off. The cousin's wife tended them. Except on Fridays. The milk tasted the same and their coats were just as shiny. They had almost forgotten that the child had ever existed.

Moreover, one evening, a man from the city had spoken with the father. He had told him that his son, the first, was studying in Damascus and that one day, inshallah, he would be an electrician. That it was a good job, because in the city everyone had electricity in their homes. It was a job with a future! And you could earn money.

— How much? asked the father, interested.

— Enough for me to rest.

The father knew that his needs were greater than those of his friend. He was a big shot. He was respected. Or feared. His other sons, the good ones, were fat. He sweated heavily. He took everything. Even an electrician's salary would be an asset to him. Especially if he didn't have to do anything for it. Except humiliate his son.

He made the calculations. Maybe school was a good thing, in the end, and his bastard son would earn more tomorrow than he did herding goats today. The boy's existence suddenly bothered him less. So he had said "yes" when the teacher came to him the following

year to tell him that it was time for his son to go to secondary school. The teacher didn't even have to mention Allah. The decision had already been made.

The father had a distant cousin in town. He agreed to house his son while he studied. He couldn't promise to feed him every day, but he was prepared to provide him with a bed, a small table and a few hours of light to work. For the father this seemed enough. The child would be satisfied with what he was given. He had to be. The father was already counting on his wages.

The name of this cousin wasn't on the list in the boy's notebook.

The father had taken the boy to Damascus himself. The trip in the van had reminded the boy of his trip to Deir ez-Zor, when he had gone to sell the goats with the cousin. As he had then, he sat in the back. Alone this time; no goats on this trip. On the back seat, inside, hidden by the steamed-up windows, the father's other sons were crammed together, glistening with the heat. He was enjoying the pleasure of not having to sit next to them. Just as before, the vehicle set off along the stony, red dirt track, leaving a suffocating cloud of crimson particles in its path. Just as before, he had tied a scarf over his mouth to be able to breathe better and let his hair fill with the desert dust. He would dust himself off when he got to town.

Damascus. With the prospect of the mythical city, his heart swayed between the apprehension of this new departure, the hope it afforded and the sorrow of leaving the teacher and his wife.

And everywhere, the scent of jasmine ...



CONTINUATION OF THE 2022 STORY

COURAGE, THE COMPANION OF OPTIMISM

In Damascus, a new life unfolds for the child who is now an adolescent.

How to mourn a childhood dream? How to reinvent a new destiny when the first dies before having lived?

His first work as a builder will be working on his success at school, which will open the door to a new country: France.

The characters

- The child, who is now a secondary school student
- The distant cousin
- Asma, daughter of the distant cousin
- The father

The location

Damascus:

The cousin's house and the streets of Damascus

Admittedly, the sea is too far away to taste the refreshing spray. But he likes to imagine that some of this imagined Mediterranean reaches him, dusting his skin with coarse salt, even though it is only the dust of the city swirled around by the threatening rain.

Because in truth he has never seen the sea. Except in books. His father's cousin, who took him in, had once, long ago, said that he would take him and his daughter swimming. That night he could hardly sleep. His mind was filled with the promise of beaches and surf, and it never left his thoughts. He imagined the crystal-clear turquoise water with golden glints, as if a god had sewn gilded threads into the troughs of the waves, like the embroidery that the craftsmen of the old city inlaid into leather. He could already hear the cry of the fishing birds, the sound of his feet running along the water's edge, the cool, damp air and the laughter that he could not contain.

In the days that followed, he and Asma had dreamed about it together. She had already been to the sea. But she must have been very small because she couldn't remember

anything about it. Yet she took advantage of this old and forgotten experience to describe the future, what it would be like to run around in the warm sand. He listened, eager for this other place.

The promise had come to nothing. Once again. And the cousins had to be resigned to spending the summer in the stifling heat of the city and the desert. His father had come to fetch him to look after the goats, as he had done in previous years. As the city plateau receded into the distance, and the van's altitude decreased on the bends in the road, the air burned hotter. He had almost forgotten the bite of the sun and the mineral quality of the heathland. But it hadn't taken long for the harshness of the desert to return to his memory. His body had stiffened, and then relaxed. As hostile as it was, the desert was his first home. And he loved it.

Still, he would have liked to spend time walking along the esplanade of the mosque with Asma in the setting sun. During the school year, no outings were permitted. Neither of them were allowed to go out. The cousin was adamant. But surprisingly, once the summer came, he loosened the stranglehold a little and allowed the youngsters to go and admire the arches and domes of the great Umayyad Mosque on Friday evenings, after prayers.

This moment of freedom shared with his friend was short-lived. One day, she put a scarf over her hair. The cousin set up a worktable in the boy's room and he was no longer allowed to study next to his friend. No one asked any questions. No one challenged the decision. They did as they were told. He hadn't felt so alone in years.

At the beginning of the school year, the two young people walked together to school. Until they reached the street where they were separated. He was now going to a boys-only secondary school. She was learning at the Koranic school, with girls her own age. They met at the end of the afternoon. It was the only time they could chat. But their destinies seemed to drift apart, irreparably.

But one day, seeing a page of drawings protruding from his schoolbag, she had asked:

— What's that?

— A drawing.

The break in the silence had surprised him, as much as her interest in his sketch.

— I can see it's a drawing! What is it of?

— A building.

— What building?

He was embarrassed. He didn't know if he should share his project.

— The building I want to build.

— You want to build buildings?!

— Yes.

— Do you want to be a mason?

— No. An architect! he replied, proudly, a smile on his face, still childlike despite his adolescence.

— Isn't that the same?

— No, it's not! It's very different.

— In what way?

It had been a long time since they had shared so much.

— The mason is the one who builds. But the architect is the one who designs!

— Who what?

— Who invents the building. Who draws it. Who makes the calculations, the plans.

— And you want to invent buildings?

— Yes, I do!

He opened his schoolbag. The two youngsters stopped at the edge of the pavement. They could no longer hear the cars honking their horns.

He was glowing! She wanted to see his drawing! Suddenly, he had so much to say! Lots of images to talk about!

The sheet of paper was bigger than Asma had expected. It was full of diagrams, graffiti, sketches and erasures. She didn't understand a thing.

— Look! You must see the whole thing first. What it will look like when it's finished.

He had turned the page over. On the back she could see an imposing building, with columns, domes, walkways, sculptures. He had even added colours here and there, to bring the flowers, shrubs and the Damascus sky to life.

— Ooooh ...

This gasp of astonishment delighted him.

— Do you like it?

— It's beautiful. What is it?

— Do you have any idea?

— I don't know. A mosque?

— No, not a mosque.

— What is it, then?

— A library!

— A library?

— Yes, a library.

— Why a library?

— Why what?

— Why do you want to build a library? There are already two!

— To collect books.

— Okay, but there are already books in the libraries. And there are libraries.

— That's true. But my library will be special.

— How?

— Special ...

He was relishing the moment. Before his eyes, he could already see his library rising. All in white marble, standing out against the red earth and the blue sky. Gold adorned the tops of its domes. The murmur of the fountains refreshed the alleys. Jasmine wound up its columns.

— Special in what way?

— I can't tell you. Not yet.

— When then?

— Soon.

— When you become an architect?

— No, no! Before.

— You promise?

— I promise.

— Is it hard to become an architect?

— I don't know. I think it is. I have to work. I have to study, a lot. That's what they told me.

— Who told you?

— A teacher at school. My maths teacher. He knows architects. And he knows what you must do to become an architect.

— And you can do that?

— I think so. I've prepared my application. I have to present it at the beginning of next week. I'll know soon enough if I'm accepted.

— And you will be?

— I'm sure of it!

She admired the strength of his conviction. She wished she could be so certain of her own future ...

The journey back to the cousin's house seemed shorter that evening. The two teenagers talked, he drawing in the air the walls of his future library, the curves and the gardens, she questioning each idea and rejoicing at the plans he was recounting.

They were lost in the meanderings of a magnificent dream. Their enthusiasm grew as the story unravelled. They felt taller, stronger, lighter too. Their feet skimmed the pavement, their footsteps leapt. They defied everything, the future and gravity.

Does joy make you as blind as overconfidence? He didn't see the deep hole in the middle of the pavement that had been left open by work in progress. Asma only had time to shout. He was already falling. Strangely, he uttered no sound. Only the dull thud of his body collapsing a few metres below pierced the tumult of the city. She turned pale and screamed:

— Help! Help! Help! Help! Someone, quickly!

Immediately, a crowd formed around the hole. Asma called out his name. There was no answer. The men spoke loudly, gave advice, reproached and were indignant at their imprudence. A woman slapped the girl and then marched off. Asma put her hand to her cheek to soothe the burning and called out again and again. A man went to call for help.

Long minutes passed before a moan drifted up to the crowd.

— He's alive! He's alive! cried Asma.

— Bring a rope! said one of the men.

— No, not a rope, a ladder. He won't be able to climb up on his own, advised another.

Two young men arrived with a ladder. It turned out to be too short, too wide. Useless.

A man, who had got out of a rusty, smoking van, came up with a rope in his hand. He pointed to another man in the crowd, whose shoulders were broad and powerful. He wrapped the rope around his waist. Other men stood between him and the hole, clutching the rope in their large, determined hands. The van driver in turn wrapped the rope around himself.

A few minutes ago, the pavement had been in confusion and indecision. And now, suddenly, a sweep of mutual aid was synchronized in a fluidity that was as effective as it was unexpected. Asma watched, astonished and impatient at the same time.

— Hurry up, please! Hurry! she pleaded.

Within seconds, the man reached the boy. At the bottom of the hole.

— He's hurt! There's blood. But he's alive!

The crowd breathed a sigh of relief.

From the street you could hear the man trying to reassure the injured boy.

— Can he move? asked a passer-by.

— No, he can't. Not on his own. We'll have to pull him up.

Along the rope, hands clenched.

The man continued to describe the boy's condition as he wound the rope around him. After a few interminable minutes, he tugged on the rope, signalling to his companions that they could pull up the nearly unconscious boy. The shaft was narrow. They had to be careful with his head and his right leg, which was hanging limply. The fractured bone had pierced the fabric of the trousers. Dislodged, it gave the figure an unusual asymmetry. Asma was struck by this, as soon as she saw her friend lying on the ground in the open air.

He was breathing heavily. The man in the van dusted himself off:

— I think he has several broken ribs too. As well as his leg.

A passer-by announced that help was on the way. Another onlooker placed his shirt under the head of the moaning boy. Inanimate, he looked even younger. Everyone strained to see him. The sky disappeared behind the torsos and the bent heads. There was no air.

Asma knelt down and stroked his hair. She was amazed at the softness of his black curls, despite the blood that had already stuck to the edge of his forehead. She was also surprised at her own boldness. She had never come so close to him. Even in their games when he had arrived in Damascus several years before, when they were still children, she had kept a certain distance. Unless it was his choice.

She whispered as much to reassure him as to keep her hopes up:

— A doctor is coming. It's going to be all right. It's going to be okay.

The boy lay motionless, his eyes closed. A little blood stained the dust. The girl wiped the blood from his mouth with her sleeve.

It was a long wait before the ambulance's siren drowned out the hubbub of the onlookers. The air was moist, sticky, tasting of metal. Asma clutched her stomach in disgust. Her paleness caused concern, as a woman holding hands with two children called for water to be given to her. The girl's forehead was beaded with sweat and her hands were shaking. She sat down and drank the glass of tea that a man handed her. The mint was hot. She shook off her nausea. The sugar was thick. It calmed her a little.

She looked around, her eyes a little lost in the void. Time had slowed down so much that the minutes were passing at the rate of hours. Then she realized that she was near the Al Nofara café. This surprised her. Her lively conversation a few moments earlier had obliterated space and time. She didn't think she was that close to home.

A little further on, the crowd continued to gather on the steps leading to the mosque. Even in a city as busy as Damascus, people were still drawn by unexpected events. Especially accidents. They were attracted and frightened at the same time. Her friend's sudden fall into a manhole that must have been left uncovered, the impromptu rescue operation, their young age ... all of this would make for lively evening conversations once everyone had gone home.

Finally, the ambulance stopped nearby. Two men got out and quickly went up to her friend, who was still unconscious. They pushed back the onlookers, who were waiting for the outcome so they could get on with their lives. Asma breathed.

— He needs to be seen by a doctor. We're taking him away.

— Where are you taking him? asked the girl.

— To hospital.

— You can't just take him like that. Wait a minute! I need to talk to my father!

— There's no time! We're taking him. Tell your father.

The boy was placed on a stretcher. Asma noticed that the handles were rusty.

— Can I come?

The paramedic stared at Asma.

— No. We only take the sick.

— But I'm with him!

— Are you his sister?

The girl blushed.

— No, his friend. He lives with us.

— Family only. No friends. Tell your father. Let's go!

As quickly as it had formed, the crowd broke up, leaving the girl alone on the pavement. Only the blood staining her sleeve told her that she had not been dreaming. She picked up the schoolbag that the man had also brought up. The drawing was no longer there ...

She started to run towards the house, although she was afraid of her father's reaction.

She wasn't allowed to go to the hospital and had to wait a week to see her cousin again. When the ambulance brought him home, he was pale and thin. His leg was hidden by a cast. She felt a twinge of sadness at how fragile he looked. He smiled at her in spite of his fatigue and sadness.

The deadline for submitting his application had passed. His maths teacher had tried to get an exemption, a delay given the circumstances, but to no avail. Rules are rules! He hadn't even been allowed to demonstrate the talents he saw in the boy. His world was collapsing. He would never be an architect. Ever.

The days that followed his return to the cousin's house were dark, gloomy, ice-cold. Everything in him was frozen: the taste for food and drink, the strength to study, the desire to smile. His future had fallen into a hole. No rope existed that could pull him up into the daylight.

Asma tried to distract him when she brought him his meal, the only time his father would allow her to see her friend. The man had resigned himself. It was not his place to serve him! Invariably, the boy pushed the plate away. He was getting thinner by the minute.

A doctor came by to saw off the plaster. The leg that had been enclosed was even more emaciated than the other. His vitality, like his muscles, had faded away. Along with hope. The doctor was concerned about the young man's lack of strength and his gloomy frame of mind. The cousin reassured him of the quality of the treatment. The doctor was satisfied. The boy turned over with difficulty, his head leaning against the wall. He did not hear the helpless sigh that Asma let out behind the door.

That evening, when the air was cooler than usual, he tried to pull up the thin blanket worn away by time. He was shivering. The window had been opened for the doctor's visit. They had forgotten to close it. He had no other choice but to get up. He rolled his angular body onto the mattress, which was also too thin to compensate for the loss of flesh. He groaned. Everything hurt.

Trying to prop himself up against the edge of the bed, he made a wrong move. His injured leg hit a bar. He screamed. The pain pinned him to the damp sheet. The walls spun, the floor shifted, nausea gripped him, his consciousness staggered.

— This thing that has to be done, you have to do it.

— What? Had he really heard someone speak?

— This thing that has to be done, you have to do it.

— Is someone there? Who's there? he cried out in the darkness.

He wiped his forehead so he could see better. The moon wasn't full enough to light the room. He saw only darkness. The voice spoke again.

— Me, who else?

— Who are you? he asked anxiously.

— Me.

The voice sounded familiar ... It had been so long! Was it possible? He felt the soft caress of goat's fur on his pale arm.

— Have you come back?

— I never left, the quavering voice replied softly.

— That's not true! I haven't heard from you in years!

— That doesn't mean I wasn't there.

— Why the silence, then?

— Why the deafness?

— Don't play with me! I'm dying! he shouted, surprised by the depth of his anger. Or his despair.

— Really?

— Yes, really. I am dead. I am nothing. No one. My future is dead, too.

— That's very sad ...

— Don't you believe me?

— I believe you. If you say so it must be true. But you talk a lot for a dead man.

— That's because I'm not quite dead yet. But I may as well be. It's pointless. He sighed.

— What's pointless?

— Everything. Staying alive. Hoping. I'll never be an architect. I'm done! I might as well be dead.

— You want to be an architect?

— Yes. You know that! I told you, out there in the desert.

— An architect? Doesn't ring a bell.

— Don't make fun of me! You know very well that I want to build.

— Yes I remember that. I remember a little boy who wanted to be a builder, the voice corrected.

— You see!

— Do you have to be an architect to build the world?

— What else can I do?

— You tell me.

— Anyway, it's all over. I don't have the strength anymore.

— Courage is without victory, but it is a victory over oneself. It is a victory over the permanent and constantly renewed invitation to give up.

— What?! He didn't understand a word.

— I'm talking to you about courage.

— And I'm talking about hope. Or rather, the end of hope. It's over! I don't believe in it anymore.

— Wouldn't you rather talk about the temptation to give up?

— It's the same thing! I give up. I'm throwing in the towel. I'm too tired.

— I understand that. You haven't eaten much lately.

— What's the point?

— You're desperate ...

The black curls had lost their fluidity, frozen by the sweat on his neck and temples. Shudders went through his body. His eyes still could not see through the darkness.

— Tell me, said the desert goat's voice. Do you want to give up? I mean, really?

— I don't know anymore. I'm scared.

— I know you are.

— I'm afraid of the world and its ugliness, I'm afraid of wickedness, I'm afraid of disappointment, I'm afraid of not living up to my ambitions, of failing ...

— These are enormous fears. Deep, deep fears ...

— In fact, to be perfectly frank, I think I'm even more afraid of living than of dying.

— But you are brave.

— No, I'm not. Because I'm afraid.

— Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to face your fears, to master them, to overcome them, tame them. It is because everything urges you to give up and fear invades your heart that you can show courage.

— Oh yes?! And how? You don't know what I'm going through. Shut up!

He felt the irony and irritation in his own voice. He was beginning to resist, to struggle. Life was finding its way into him, disguised as anger.

— There is genius in courage, a form of distinction of the soul, which chooses to rise above the common, sometimes with panache, sometimes with discretion, but always with determination.

— And what does all this mean in practice? What should I do? he huffed, exasperated and impatient.

— Willingness allows you to find the secret passage to power.

— What's that? You're not helping me. You're useless!

The voice went on, more softly.

— Wanting allows you to find the secret passage to power. What do you want?

— Nothing! he snapped back.

— Are you sure? I have the feeling that you think there's nothing you can do. But what do you want, in your heart?

For a few minutes the night was silent.

— I want to be a builder, confessed the boy.

— You already are!

— Not at all! I couldn't apply to the school of architecture.

— You are the builder of your destiny. You are already on your way. You have been for a long time. Look back. Look at how far you've come. What's your next step?

— I don't know.

— Look again. What can a bright, hard-working student do?

— Succeed in my studies.

— Fine. But what else?

— What else?

— How will you get your strength back?

For the first time in a long time, he felt hunger in his stomach.

— What if I fail? he fretted.

— That's a risk. Failure is neither certain nor uncertain.

— I'd rather do nothing then.

— And die?

— If I have to.

— Discouragement, fear, inertia. These are the first experiences of courage.

— Then I must be very brave!

— But will you be brave enough to open the book and drink the tea that Asma left on your table?

Curiosity got the better of his pain. He took a sip of the cooled liquid. The title of the book danced in the gloom: *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. On the first page he recognized Asma's handwriting: "For every man there are things he can overcome and things he cannot. This is probably what makes heroes humble to themselves and merciful to others."

He finished the year in style. His first place in the baccalaureate earned him a scholarship and an invitation to choose his academic discipline and future country of study.

Without hesitation, he asked for the United States and a school of architecture.

Without hesitation, they chose for him.

So it would be computer science. And France.



CONTINUATION OF THE 2022 STORY

AMBITION STRONGER THAN DOUBT

In Europe, the destiny of the child who has become an adult takes a new turn with the acquisition of a small business. Despite his many doubts, his ambition to build a company is undimmed.

The characters

- The child who is now a student
- The landlady
- Michel, a stranger who has become a friend
- Jean, a student who has become a friend

The place

A town in the south of France

As he steps onto French soil for the first time, leaving behind a distant, lingering attachment, he is flooded with joy. Where does it come from? He looks at his meagre belongings. Everything he owns fits into a modest suitcase. The worn leather, the frayed handles, the weathered buckles. His life is like his luggage. Solid and fragile at the same time. Everything holds together. Everything could break. All at once. He thinks back to the day when the teacher came to get him, and his little bundle. In a few years, his possessions have barely accumulated. A few books that he always has with him. A blanket. Some clothes. A toilet bag. On the station platform, in this southern city, in the middle of a hurried and well-dressed crowd, he has never felt so poor. Ever. And yet.

And yet, to be honest with himself: the fear that gripped him before the plane took off has vanished, transformed into a new, dizzying feeling. A new sense of exaltation. A euphoric inner breath, intoxicating his mind, thrilling his heart, delighting his eyes.

Freedom.

As he breathes in the city's air, he feels a sudden dizziness. He rests his hand on a bench to keep from falling over. Around him, the platform continues to vibrate, echoing with the passengers' steps on the asphalt. He looks at his watch. It's almost three o'clock. He hasn't eaten anything since Paris. He's thirsty. His throat is dry. His stomach twists in acute pain. He puts his hand on his forehead. He is sweating. His

pallor must have shown, because a passer-by asks him if he needs anything, if he should call a doctor. “No, no, do not trouble yourself”, he tries in overly bookish French. The man continues on his way. He’s alone again. After a few moments on the bench, he already feels better. Digging into his pocket, he finds a caramel toffee. The one from the plane. The sweet had melted. The paper is stuck. He puts it in his mouth and tastes the unknown flavour. He thinks about this city, this country, the sounds, the smells. And now the tastes ...

A few steps away, a Wallace drinking fountain issues a trickle of water. He scoops some up and moistens first his lips, then the back of his neck and finally his forehead. The desert has taught him to be frugal. And to quench his thirst with very little. Reinvigorated, he can once again feel the joy pulsing inside him. Hunger, too. At the station counter, a woman is putting out some bread. There is a slice of pink inside it. He hands over some coins. Leaning against a wall, with the shrill sound of the brakes on the rails, he savours it. He will only learn later that he has eaten ham. For the moment, he enjoys it.

Before he left, the Ministry of Education official in charge of his file gave him the address of the university and the boarding house where he would be staying. He stops a young man who looks about his age and shows him the paper, questioning:

— On foot, is that possible?

— You’re not from around here! Have you just arrived? the passer-by asks.

— Yes.

— It’s not too far. But it’s a bit hard to explain. You have to take the back streets. It goes up and down. I can walk some of the way with you if you like, even all the way there.

The young man hesitates. He’s not sure he understands. Why would someone who doesn’t know him offer to walk with him? He thinks of the thieves who are common in some parts of Damascus and recoils. The young man notices.

— Don’t worry! I’m not going to rob you! says the passer-by, smiling and pointing to the suitcase with a shake of his head. You’re not exactly rolling in money!

— You talk fast. Too fast. Is it possible for you to repeat?

— I can walk a little way with you, he said again, mimicking with his fingers the movement of his legs while walking. Okay?

— Okay.

— So are we on first-name terms?

— What?

— Shall we drop the formality?

— If you like.

— Come on then! We’ll end up with sunstroke if we stay in this heat!

— What?

— Nothing! Let’s go, then.

— Let’s go, agrees the young foreigner, following the stranger who seems to know the city like the back of his hand.

The stranger talks to him all the way. He speaks so fast that he can only make out a few words. And he thought he spoke French fluently! He senses that his vocabulary is too literary, his turns of phrase too complicated, and that his ear is still alien to the flow of the language of Molière in the South. But he already loves it and promises himself that before long he will speak it as fluently as the locals.

Indeed the boarding house is not far from the station. It is hidden away in the old town. To get to it, you leave the train station behind you, go to the main square, through the narrow streets and down a narrow stone staircase.

— This is it! We're here, announces the stranger.

— Thank you. Thank you very much.

— You're welcome! Happy to oblige!

— Thank you.

— By the way, what's your name?

— Mohammed.

— Are you from North Africa?

— No. From Syria. From Damascus.

— Well, you're the first Syrian I've met! This is a red-letter day! exclaims the young stranger with an engaging smile.

— What was that?

— No, nothing. It was a pleasure. And if you want to go for a drink sometime, I'm often at the café, on the square. You know the square?

— Yes the square.

— You'll find me there in the evening, after work. My name's Michel. See you then.

— All right, then.

He watches the young man walk away whistling. Michel, prompting himself to memorize this new name. He can't believe it. Never in all the years he spent in Damascus has anyone spoken to him for so long without knowing him. He feels that he is going to love this country. When he pushes open the door of the boarding house, he's not quite so sure ...

The odour catches in his throat. A mixture of fried onions and rancid, pungent air. It smells dusty, old and run down. Dirty. The gloom in the long, narrow corridor adds to his discomfort. After the sun-dazzled city, his eyes strain to adjust to the darkness. He gropes for a light switch, but to no avail. Apparently, no one heard him knock, since no one came to greet him. He hesitates. Should he wait or should he go forward? After a moment, he gets his bearings. At the end of the corridor he sees a glass door and there seems to be a shadow moving behind it. He decides to approach it. But before he gets a chance to announce himself the door opens on a plump woman of an indeterminate age. She is like the place. Neglected.

— Who are you? she barks at him.

The young man is surprised by the aggressive tone of her voice.

— I'm calling Mohammed. Sorry, my name is Mohammed.

— What are you doing here? What do you want?

— I live here.

— I've never seen you before!

— I have just arrived. From home. I am a student.

— Ah! Are you the Syrian? concludes the landlady, questioning nevertheless.

— Yes, I am.

— It's about time! We were expecting you yesterday. Well, come in. I'll show you your room. Do you have any luggage?

— This.

— This? she asks disdainfully. Whatever next.

Without answering, he follows her up the stairs. The steps creak, the banister is sticky. He prefers not to hold on to it and climbs silently behind the landlady. She opens a door to a very small, rather dark, room.

— This is it! You're home! she declares. Well, in a manner of speaking ... There's a cupboard. That should do you, she says, wryly. The bathroom's on the landing. Everyone takes turns cleaning it. You'll sort it out with your friends on the same floor.

— Sorry, could you repeat that? I don't speak French well yet.

— That's all I need! Right, you see with Jean. The door next to yours. He will explain.

— Okay, fine. Jean.

— You also clean your room. It's paid for until the end of the year. But if you use too much heating, you'll be hearing from me!

He nods. He hasn't understood a word. The strong accent, no doubt. Fatigue, perhaps.

— Meals are downstairs, in the dining room. And if you decide to eat in your room, you deal with the rats. Understand? she threatens more than informs him.

— I understand. He thinks so, anyway.

— Well, I'll let you get settled in. This is your room key. And this is the key to the front door. You'll be back before eleven o'clock at night. No girls. No music. No alcohol. No smoking. You keep your nose clean. Is that understood?

— Yes, I understand. Before eleven o'clock.

— As for the rest, Jean will explain. He'll be back from university later this afternoon. Right, it's all yours!

He closes the door. Not too quickly, so as not to be unpleasant. Through the open window, he hears the noise of the city. The air is hot and dry. After putting his things away in the cupboard, he puts a photo of Asma on the small table next to his bed. He also puts up the new drawing of his library, which he has carried with him. It will be all right, he thinks. But when he lies down on the creaky bed, a tear burns his cheek.

Luckily, there was Jean. And Michel. During all those years. To escape the loneliness. To decode this city, this country, this language. To fight off doubt. A thousand times he thought of giving it all up. Leaving for good. Returning to Syria. He would be no less poor, no less lonely, but at least he would be home. Do misery and boredom weigh less when you're at home? But each time he picked himself up. No! He won't give up! Even if it's hard, even if he often goes hungry, even if he's not really interested in computers. His dream of architecture seems so far away.

Sometimes, often, in the evening, after studying, after writing up his doctoral thesis, he draws. In his drawer, on the walls of his room, a city awaits him. A world of white stone, shady streets, columns and domes, palm trees and fountains. He can already hear the murmur of water, the rushing wind, laden with sand and the scent of the desert. His skin already knows the coolness of the evening and the heat of midday. No! He won't give up! Even if it's hard, even if he's often hungry, even if he's indifferent to computers. His dream of architecture seems so far away. Round the corner of an alley, he sees Asma ...

That morning in March, the door bursts open suddenly, rousing him from the drowsiness that comes over him every day with his dreams of building. Steadfast dreams that have stayed with him. For all these years. His university studies haven't quelled his ambition. On the contrary.

— Aren't you ready yet? What are you doing, Mohed? We'll be late. Get a move on! Jean urges him, visibly in a hurry.

— Give me a second. I'm coming!

— Drawing again? You shouldn't be a computer scientist. You should be a draughtsman!

— An architect. Not a draughtsman. Architect, Mohed corrects him.

— Whatever. Maybe not an architect, maybe not a computer scientist, maybe ... Hurry up! The court opens in less than half an hour. We have to get there first. It'll all go very fast, you'll see.

— Are you sure everything is in order? With the bank? Mohed worries.

— It's all good! You did everything right! Have you got your identity papers? Jean checks.

Since their meeting several years ago, Jean can't help being protective towards his friend, whom he knows has no family in France. He readily admits it: he's a bit paternalistic towards him. Or brotherly perhaps?

— I've got everything. No, wait, I don't have the takeover project. Where did I put it? No, it's okay. It's in my bag. We can go.

The two of them rush down the stairs. After all these years in the boarding house, they no longer see the saltpetre on the walls or the broken steps. In the street, they run towards the law courts. It was Jean who first told him about the repossessions in the courtroom.

— My friend, if you want to buy a company on the cheap, this is the solution! he confided one evening as Mohed shared his doubts about his options to make his fortune.

He had believed him. And now he is running towards his destiny. He can feel it. His life will take a new turn. In front of the imposing building, a packed crowd waits impatiently. The gates open. The mass of people climb the steps.

— Move it, we have to get a good seat! Jean urges him, excited and impatient.

Indeed, everything went very fast.

In the street, sitting with a cup of coffee in front of him, he still can't believe it.

— Come on! It's no big deal! It'll work next time! his French friend tries to console him.

— I had everything planned. What happened? Mohed looks stunned.

— What happened is that someone made a better offer than you. That's what happened!

— But it was overpriced! exclaims the young Syrian.

— Maybe so. But that's the game.

— It's not a game. It's my future! Now I'm screwed!

— Mohed, you can be so dramatic sometimes. Of course you're not screwed. One down, ten to go!

— What?

— One down, ten to go!

— Rubbish! I hate that expression. It's completely false. And what's more, it's vulgar. Jean I really wanted that company. It was meant for me.

— Apparently not ...

— Don't rub it in. It's hard enough as it is.

— Who cares?

Jean's apparent indifference riles him.

— We care! I worked hard on this case!

— You always work hard.

— It's not fair!

— You're right. It's not fair. Anyway, even if you'd offered more, the judge didn't seem too keen on your project.

- Really?
- Really. He looked at you as if to say: “Too young.”
- Too foreign, maybe also.
- Maybe. Let it go!
- Let it go?! Mohed is indignant.
- Yes! Finish your thesis, take the job at the oil company, leave France for a year or two, earn some money, get some experience and come back stronger. And then the judge will have no choice. You’ll be the one to get the next company!
- It’s easy for you to say. That puts everything on hold! My whole project. I’ll never make it! The young man already regrets his defeatism.
- Hey where’s my friend who believes in his lucky star, eh? Jean teases him gently.
- I don’t have a lucky star! That’s all bullshit! Here’s the proof!
- Proof of nothing! How long are you going to cry over your fate?
- That’s easy for you to say! I have no choice. This is my only chance. And you’re not the one who’s been studying like crazy, in the evenings, on top of research, classes, work and everything else!
- That’s true. But everyone knows I’m lazy!
- Mohed doesn’t like it when his friend belittles himself as he sometimes does.
- Very funny.
- Not that funny. Come on, it’s a blessing in disguise. I’m sure it is.
- You promise? the young man insists.
- I promise. Jean’s word!
- So, what’s this idea of one chance? Are you being serious? Everyone has several chances. Just because we don’t take them all doesn’t mean they don’t exist.
- I wish I shared your optimism.
- Look at yourself, Mohed! You’re a perfect example of what I just said!
- I don’t feel very lucky.
- You’re kidding! You’re the luckiest man alive!
- I’ve been pushing my luck a bit. You seem to forget that.
- And what do you think everyone else does?

When he thinks back to that moment, almost two years ago, now that he is waiting again in front of the courtroom doors, he has a sense of joy, exaltation. Or rather, a certainty, running right through him. The kind that sustains hope and is sustained by it in return. This time he’s ready. The two years he has just spent in the Middle East have given him time to think. To learn. To understand. To become more flexible. To bounce back. Again and again.

He is also more lucid. About himself, about life. At least, he thinks so. He has learned to tame his doubts and worries a little better, to make sure that they don’t take up all the space, that they don’t erode his faith in himself and in the future to the point of despair. Yes, he does get dispirited at times. But never defeated. Since the desert slopes, he has known which side he’s on: that of willpower, optimism, moderate certainly, but optimism all the same. Despite the obstacles. When he thinks about it, fatalism is a word that he hasn’t used for a long time. Did he ever use that word? Was it ever really part of his vocabulary?

He clutches the file under his arm. In his hands, a few sheets of paper and the pen that Jean gave him before he left. That’s all. And his confidence, rooted in his body. And in his soul.

— Sold!

The sound of the wooden hammer releases a vibratory wave inside him. A mixture of fear and impatience. His hand shook a little as he signed. Discreetly. Imperceptibly.

He sat at the table where he had sat with Jean two years earlier. Just to wink at history. To ward off fate. To smile at fate.

He puts down the cup of the slightly bitter coffee he has just drunk. It's spring but it's already hot. He runs his hand over his forehead, leaves some coins in the saucer in front of him and gets up. He pushes open the door of the telephone box which is just a few steps away.

— Jean? That's it! It worked!

Over the receiver, his friend's enthusiasm makes him smile. He hangs up, happy. When he thinks of Michel, his heart sinks. On this square, he is everywhere, even though he is no longer there.

He would have liked to call Asma. But for several long months, she hasn't answered his messages. He had tried to call her father, the distant cousin, but on hearing his voice, the father hung up. The same with his own father. He had cut the conversation short the last time he'd tried to reach him, on the day he defended his thesis. His father wasn't interested in knowing that he now held a PhD. And can you be an electrician with your degree? How could I explain it to him? He hadn't even tried. He resigned himself to not sharing his joy and pride with his family. What was the point? As for the grandmother, an acquaintance had informed him that she had been found lifeless in her tent. If he wanted to pay his respects, he would find her grave, a pile of stones, at the foot of the dune he used to climb to walk the goats. No doubt the sand had since buried her memory.

He's meeting Jean and his wife this evening. They'll drink champagne. But for now, he has to find a flat. Now that he's moving back to the city he can't stay at a hotel any longer. The real estate agency is across the street from the boarding house where lived as a student. One street separates these two moments of his life, a short stretch of tarmac and cobblestones. A few metres. A world.

His mind hasn't stopped since the deed was signed. It buzzes with questions. Just when he thought he had everything figured out! He realizes that despite his research, his analysis, the information he has gathered, the data he has checked and re-checked, the uncertainty remains. And with it, his own uncertainty. If only the future could be more predictable! He would be less worried, more confident.

— What you want is to know your future!

Michel's voice echoes in his memory. He's surprised to find himself answering him, across the years.

— Not the whole future, no. But enough to be sure I'm not making a mistake.

— That's just not possible, my friend! He thinks he hears Michel. His joy, his frankness, his vitality. Time machines don't exist yet!

— Too bad, Mohed responds with regret.

— You're crazy! What would life be like if you knew exactly what to expect? It's the unknown that's exciting. That's the spice of life!

Michel's appetite for risk always drew him in. Today he resents his excesses, his recklessness. His inconsolable absence. In a dream, he carries on his imaginary conversation.

— I could live with a little less spice then.

— I don't think so, Michel seems to retort. What you want is to be sure that your life will turn out the way you want it to. And it bugs you not to be sure. Or that things don't move fast enough. Am I wrong?

His friend's intuition had always fascinated him. He realizes how much their too short friendship has changed him. It was by his side that he learned to trust more and more. To trust himself more and more. And with Jean, too. Even if he sometimes still has doubts. It's true. But in those moments, he always feels the presence of his friend. Death is unfair. In the face of such injustice, he has only his courage and an untiring, unbending faith. Even if sometimes, often, it bends under the weight of adversity.

He has been after this company for some time now. When Jean told him about it a few months ago, when he was still abroad, a long way from France, he had been planning to stay in the Middle East for a few more years. The climate, the food, the language, the warmth ... he enjoyed reconnecting with these parts of his past. The conditions were so different from what he had known as a child and as a teenager. More pleasant. Even if he was well aware that the others had not accepted him easily. A certain distance. A certain discomfort that he couldn't explain. But he had the feeling that his university years had changed him. He had changed. The proof: he had two friends. But here he had to start all over again, win it all back. Doesn't the effort ever stop, he thought. He didn't wait for his own answer. He already had it. Any other option was simply unthinkable. The desert had taught him that: fight, struggle, tenacity, courage. Let your guard down and you're dead.

And solidarity too. Because in this inhospitable environment, nobody survives without the support of others. For him, solidarity had taken on the twisted face of the old woman, the impatience of the cousin, the harshness of the father, the wickedness of the stepmother. But also the demands of the teacher and the tenderness of his wife. What little he had received, he had known how to seize, to use and transform. He had learned to satisfy his heart with little. Without doubt, he had never abandoned his reserve. Jean and Michel sometimes laughed about it, affectionately mocking the distance he kept from them, despite the moments of conviviality and closeness. Friends. Real friends. As for himself, he had never felt so close to anyone. A question of perspective. A question of the past. A question of history.

Now that he owned a modest business on the verge of collapse, he felt both happy and anxious. I can't afford to make a mistake, he told himself. It has to work! I have to get it up and running!

— Did I ever tell you about Mohed and his optimism? Jean asks his wife. She smiles and nods.

— A thousand times.

— Are you making fun of me? he asks, acting indignant.

— I am, just a bit!

— It will work. It's bound to.

Invariably, Jean's confidence in his friend's talents is total.

— You don't know that, insists the young Syrian.

— I do know. It always works. Even when you're scared, even when it's hard. Always!

— More or less.

— More like more, Jean tries to convince him. When was the last time something you set out to do didn't work.

— All the time. It happens to me all the time!

— Oh yeah? And when exactly?

— Many times. I don't necessarily talk about it. I don't tell you everything! he admits, smiling.

— Well I think you need me to tell you again: it doesn't matter if you make a mistake. If you don't get it right the first time.

— I know.

— You know, but you act like everything has to work perfectly all the time. Immediately.

— But this is different! People are counting on me. I can't let them down, exclaims the young man.

The desire to succeed. Sometimes he wonders whether his ambitious goals are not, paradoxically, the very obstacle ...

— You're right, Jean admits, surprising his friend.

— What do you mean I'm right? You're agreeing with me now? asks Mohed in surprise.

— Not only now!

The creases in the corners of Jean's eyes betray his amusement.

— You're messing with my head.

— Not at all! I just admire the energy you put into trying to convince me that you doubt yourself.

— Because I do! I doubt myself all the time, insists Mohed.

— And yet you act. You do. You take on one challenge after another.

Silence. Only the sound of plates being stacked in the small kitchen.

— Mohed, I'll say it again, in case you've forgotten or my take on life is still foreign to you: optimism isn't about not having doubts, not asking questions, being sure of everything. It is not about ignoring problems and difficulties. It's not being naïve. Quite the opposite! In fact, it's a bit like courage. It's continuing to believe that solutions exist, that we have the means to overcome obstacles, alone or with others, that overall, things will work out, if we do the right thing. And sometimes, it's true, with a bit of luck.

— Luck ...

— And work! But I don't need to remind you about any of that. You know what I mean! You'll make it. You're going to keep flying on your own. And you know that.

The young man finds himself smiling, too. Because yes, deep down, he knows it. He knows that he will give it his all, that he won't give in or give up, that he will put his intelligence and determination to work. That he will surround himself with the right people. That he will innovate. That he will invent.

As he walks through the narrow streets of the sleepy old town towards his hotel room, he thinks of his drawings posted up on the walls in the boarding house. The pencil lines are now fused with the name of his new company. He thinks of the image of flight Jean had once referred to. Two stylized wings.

A new name: his own.

And an unaltered ambition. To build.



CONTINUATION OF THE 2022 STORY

OPTIMISM AS A DRIVER FOR DEVELOPMENT

The company's development accelerates despite difficult conditions and numerous obstacles. The breath of optimism takes the company to new horizons.

The characters

- The child who is now an adult entrepreneur
- Jean, his friend
- Eleanor, his future wife
- Colleagues

Location

A town in the south of France

Looking into the mirror, he reflects. About the soul, his own soul, which could be stolen. He doesn't believe that. About the image, again his own, looking back at him. He finds that he looks washed out. His complexion is pale. Dark circles that are too pronounced for his young face. A few silver threads in his hair, already. His working hours, probably. Tiredness, no doubt. Stress too. Doubt. Many doubts, in fact. Every morning he asks himself the same question. To avoid getting bogged down in a negative routine. To gauge his level of conviction. In relation to himself and to the company. It's important for him to be convinced of his actions. Otherwise how could those who agreed to follow him in this somewhat crazy adventure believe it? So every day he asks himself, "And if I had to invest in the company today, would I do it?" For all these years, despite the setbacks, despite the obstacles, despite the economic situation which is not always favourable, far from it, he gives the same reply to his reflection in the mirror. Invariably. Yes.

His lasting conviction remains firm. His confidence in his project, in his vision, remains unchanged.

For all these years, Jean has been amused to hear him speak so passionately about his projects and ambition.

— To change the world? Is that all?

- Jean loves teasing him.
- No of course not change the whole world. But change it enough. Make a difference. Build something. Something important.
- You've already done that! You've already made a difference. Look where you are! Jean invites him, stretching out his arms to show how much his friend has achieved.
- Where am I?
- Stop! Do you realize that your company is worth several hundred million euros?
- Yes, thank you, I do ...
- Do you realize that when you bought it, it wasn't worth a penny?
- It was worth all my savings remember! Mohed says, feigning indignation.
- Okay, back then that was a lot. But now? It's amazing how far you've come! Honestly, I don't know how you did it.
- I worked.
- You certainly did. But that's not all.
- What else then? Mohed asks, interested.
- Work, granted. But also flair, boldness, courage, tenacity.
- You're making me blush!
- And passion. You know what? Of all your qualities, I think that's the one that amazes me the most. The passion you put into everything you do.
- Passion is a quality? asks the young Syrian with gentle irony.
- You know what I mean. Look at you! You're standing there, excited like on the first day, telling me about your new target, the new people you're going to hire, the new clients you've persuaded with so much passion!
- It's the passion of a builder. Everyone has that in them. The will to build, to grow.
- Yes. More or less, anyway.
- Perhaps.
- Many of us may want to build but we can't all do it. Not to the extent we dream of, anyway. Look at me!
- Look at you what? You're a great lecturer. All your students say so.
- But I haven't changed flats since I left the boarding house. Money issues.
- Between Jean and himself, the question of money is not an issue. It never has been. But he knows that the end of the month can sometimes be complicated for Jean and his wife. Especially since the arrival of their third child. How can they keep their spirits up when the bills pile up, expenses multiply and their income keeps dropping? He admires his friend's courage. His optimism despite the difficulties, it inspires him.
- When I think about it, I think there's something else that impresses me about you. It's your optimism! Jean adds affectionately.
- He is startled, surprised by how the word optimism came into his mind and was said aloud by Jean at the same moment.
- My optimism? You mean your optimism? insists Mohed.
- Are we talking about you? I think you're an optimistic person.
- So do I.
- We're in agreement, then, says Jean happily. Their complicity continues to delight him, after all these years.
- I think *you're* an optimist.
- Optimists of the world unite! says Jean, raising his fist to the ceiling.

— That's right! Materially, your situation is more difficult than mine. And yet you keep on smiling. You're always convinced that you'll be fine, that you'll get through it, and things will work out. I'm a lot more worried than you are!

— Does that stop you from acting?

— No, on the contrary, Mohed admits.

— That's the paradox of optimism!

— It's as if my worries were my driving force. It's weird, isn't it?

— Your worries or your ambition?

— Both, I think. The businessman he has become pauses to reflect.

— Maybe because basically you're convinced that you will find a solution. That you'll manage to take advantage of the situation, even when it doesn't look good. It's both! Your fears and your optimism. You've been doing that since you were a kid, haven't you? At least since I've known you. Am I wrong?

He prefers not to venture into the realm of childhood. What's the point? Through the window, a light summer breeze tries in vain to cool Jean's small living room. Strangely the air suddenly seems even hotter and stuffier. Perhaps because until now, until this breeze, he hadn't noticed the temperature. He has always loved the feeling of the air as rarefied, compact, caught in the clutches of the heatwave. It made every breath so much more delightful, every cool current of air so much more invigorating. And his lungs have learned to take advantage of the slightest particle of wind, to expand sparingly but efficiently.

He thinks of the desert, the precious water, the scorching heat of the day. How can you teach frugality here, in a temperate climate, where water abounds, where the sun holds back its force, where life explodes in a thousand shades of green? Is it even necessary? Intuitively, or as a reflex, he can't do otherwise. He hates waste. He cultivates moderation. In everything. Or almost. Only his dreams remain grandiose. The luxury of the child who roamed the red and stony heathland barefoot, with only a fierce desire to live. And the absolute need to give meaning to the absurd. And to the unacceptable.

Going to bed that night, he thinks about their conversation. And what he didn't share with Jean. The impact of the crisis on his margins. On his order book. On the morale of his employees. How will he motivate them? For himself, he always finds a way. Even if he has to plunge the depths of his optimism. He manages to never despair, to never give up. A few days ago he called his managers together. And the employees. His speech was too grandiose. Too solemn. Too positive. Falsely confident. He realized this. Immediately. Or rather, just afterwards. "Everything will be fine." Nobody believed it. How could they in the face of the current realities? He blamed himself. For forcing the issue. For covering up the difficulties. For pretending that they would disappear by waving a wand. Or for not weighing up the present and the future. Too much positive kills the positive.

He has since rectified this. The very next day he gathered together his closest colleagues. During the night he had been thinking.

— What I said yesterday wasn't correct. I didn't convince anyone. I know that. You can't hide from reality. I can't hide reality. You can't minimize the risk. The risks.

Around him, he could see the approval on their faces. Concern too. And some curiosity.

— I realize this now. By trying to reassure people too much, I got everyone worried. The facts. First the facts. Always the facts. We need to go back to the figures, review the dashboards, maybe think about our indicators. Do you agree with that?

Agreed.

— We also need to look at how we read the data. How we interpret it. Putting the data into perspective, making comparisons. All of this must help us form a more accurate idea of the situation. Our analysis is good. It can be more rigorous. More systematic. And we can challenge it more. What do you think?

They agree. It's true, we could do better. Even if it's not pleasant to say so. Or rather, to hear it said.

— Beyond the data, we need to review our practices, how we do things. I know, it's a huge undertaking. It'll take time. Several years perhaps. But I don't think we have a choice. We have to think differently. We have to be inspired by what works elsewhere. We have to adapt best practices to our environment. To innovate. Does this make sense?

Yes. Sort of.

— These are difficult times. Complicated. I'm well aware that it's unsettling. That everyone is asking questions. Which is normal. But we have a choice: either look at the glass as half empty or as half full.

A choice? Really?

— It sounds a bit counter-intuitive, I know. But I'm convinced that it's our job to focus on what's going well and what's not. We can't give in to pessimism. We can't give up. Not now. Not until we've tried everything. We're not there yet. We have an obligation, all of us here, to look for solutions. There must be solutions!

Silence.

— It's not about being naïve or being a naïve positivist. We can't act on everything, I agree. But we absolutely must act on what comes within our sphere of influence. And we have to set an example. If we believe in this, others will believe in it too. I'm sure they will! I truly believe in the contagious power of confidence.

The president clears his throat. He hesitates and then continues, enthusiastic, determined, and eager to change the way his closest colleagues perceive the situation. He is convinced that it is all a question of perspective, of looking at things in a different way.

— We will have to emphasize our values. In the storm, when everything seems uncertain, the only things that will guide our action, that *must* guide our action, that will give us the basic stability we need, are — one — our values and — two — our direction. Our vision. At the very least, what needs to be clear to everyone are the principles that govern our decisions. What do you think?

Nodding. Approval.

— We'll have to roll up our sleeves, he continues. I might as well be clear. It's not a done deal. But the battle is not lost in advance. We must give the future a chance. We can do this. Together. I'm not saying it'll be easy. I'm not saying that it will be all satisfaction. I'm just saying that if we don't believe in it, then it's not even worth trying. I'm asking you the question. It's simple. Straightforward. Do you believe in this? Does any part of you, however small, however infinitesimal, want to believe? Does it want to go there? If so, then let's ask ourselves about the means. And the strategy. If all of you here tell me that it's dead, then we stop everything. It's quite simple, really.

He is grateful to them. For daring. Daring to follow him. And placing their confidence in him. At the time, but also afterwards. Even more so when he is lying on a hospital bed.

As is often the case in the South, when it rains, it really rains. Hard, blinding rain. The dinner with a potential shareholder had gone on too long. They had served wine.

Lots of it. It was hot in the dining room. Very hot. He was tired after all the months of battling. All those weeks of carrying whatever could be saved, single-handedly. Knocking on doors. Trying to persuade people. Brushing aside doubts with a counter argument. Showing that he still believed. Putting on a brave face.

At the same time, he had to admit that the discipline he had imposed on himself over recent months had paid off. Every morning he found at least one thing to look forward to in his long list of daily tasks. And every evening he listed what had gone well. And always he tried to put things into context. To look at events in the light of his project, his vision, his ambition. How did what he was doing contribute to building, consolidating, creating? At whatever level. There were few nights when he was angry with himself for not having built anything in the last few hours.

On the other hand, the frantic pace, the long hours, the support given and sought, had exhausted him. Why didn't he listen to his body telling him it was time to take a break? He had to wait for his body to scream in pain as the cab of his crashed, car pressed against his chest. The sound of rain on the windscreen was the last thing he remembered. That and the taste of iron in his mouth.

— Sir, sir, stay awake! We're going to take you in. What is your name? Sir, don't go to sleep! Sir!

Beep. Beep. Beep. Blackout.

When he opened his eyes again a few days later, he was blinded by the neon on the ceiling. Or maybe it was the glare that the shutters couldn't keep out. He tried sitting up in bed. He was submerged in pain. Immediately. He felt the warmth of a hand on his hand.

Since he had entered hospital, Jean and his wife had been taking turns at his bedside. And also Eleanor. That was more surprising because, to tell the truth, they had only seen each other a few times before the accident. The presence of the young woman, whose perfume filled the room and expelled the smell of detergent and care products, was reassuring. Soft. Muted. Sweet. Perhaps the tone of her voice, unbelievably melodious, or the rustle of her hair whenever she bent her head to adjust the pillow? Little by little, he dreaded the moments when she left his side and looked forward to seeing her again the next day. He could hear her footsteps, discreet and rhythmic, echoing down the long corridors with their peeling walls. She would enter. She would smile. And the day would, at last, dawn.

Rehabilitation was long and painful, as his muscles, bones and flesh had been so traumatized. The unfailing support of the physiotherapists and other carers who supported him was invaluable and life-saving. Their encouragement, their confidence in his ability to walk again, their professionalism, but also their high standards, all contributed to his recovery. His morale and determination had also proved to be as essential as they were indispensable.

Yet how many times had he been tempted to give up? When the physical pain became so acute that it radiated down his spine, it seemed that not a single part of his body was spared. Not a muscle that wouldn't tense up. Not a nerve that didn't electrify. He gritted his teeth. He kept telling himself that tomorrow would be better, that every step forward, no matter how small, was a victory against adversity, a piece of ground regained over paralysis.

Jean watched him fight. He smiled. For the first time, he thought he could see worry in his friend's eyes.

— I'll be all right! I'll walk again! asserts Mohed, wincing with pain.
— If you say so.
— Don't you believe in me anymore?
Of course I do. What do the doctors say? And your physio? asks Jean.
— They are confident.
— But still?
— They think the progress is encouraging.
— Their prognosis?
— Rather vague. They are confident. And so am I.
— Are you in pain?
— Sometimes.
— Sometimes?
— All the time. Mostly at night. And in the morning, when I get up, admits Mohed.
— How do you do it?
— How do I do what?
— What you do. All of it. To be so sure everything's going to be alright. I must admit that even I have my doubts.
Jean's anxiety, from someone usually so positive and optimistic, was contagious.
— I don't really have a choice, says Mohed, pulling himself together. You can't build if you're stuck on the ground.
Jean smiled. Shyly.
— Can I tell you a secret?

Mohed moved to sit up in bed. Or at least tried to. His face tensed with the pain. This did not escape his friend, who hurried to help him.

— A secret? Yes, as long as it doesn't trap me, Jean complies.
— Don't worry! You know what I do when I go to bed? I imagine myself running. In the desert. Running up and down the dunes. I see myself walking on the stones. It's so intense that my feet actually feel like they're hurting, as if the stones have pierced my shoes. Do you think I'm crazy?
— Nothing new about that! jokes Jean.
— Honestly, the more I do it, the more I feel like my motor skills are improving. Do you think that's possible?
— I don't know! What does your doctor say?
— He says to keep running in bed! The image of being able to walk normally is getting stronger. I can feel it in my legs. Of course, in the morning, I'm a bit disappointed. Because reality catches up with me. Hard. But still, I find that I've made more progress since I've been doing this – I don't really know what to call it – this projection. This visualization.
— If it helps you ...
— Jean! I'm going to walk again! I need you to believe it too. Okay?
— I do.

Of course in the darkness and loneliness of the night, Mohed's optimism falters and sometimes collapses. At first he tried to fight the fear. And then he stopped. Stopped pushing it away. In order to welcome it. To tame it. The pain, too. Like he used to do when he was a child, curled up in the freezing sand, with only the starry sky for

protection. When the only comfort was the slight warmth of his breath on his shoulder. Surprisingly, the more he accepted the possibility of disability and mourned the loss of a certain mobility, the harder he trained, and the more supple he became. His assiduity in the rehabilitation room was unwavering. He refused Eleanor's arm when she tried to help him move from the bed to the chair, which was barely a metre away. She understood and respected his approach. He saw, in her ability not to insist, the enormous respect she had for him. And her confidence too. Which, in turn, fed his own confidence.

He couldn't help drawing parallels with the way he dealt with his staff. And he told himself that he would have to make some adjustments in his behaviour. This was his main source of impatience, heightened by the feeling of helplessness every day at not being able to be in the office with his team. He spent hours on the phone, when he wasn't training. In the evening, exhaustion got the better of his will. He would fall asleep immediately, deeply, until the pain woke him up, his body in a state of panic, shaking and sweating.

He thought he could hear the wind cursing him, the bushes pushing him over the edge. The stepmother's voice invaded his restless nights, as did that of the grandmother. In the morning, gasping for breath, he was surprised that they could still haunt his dreams. What did he have to do to finally free himself from this past? The question remained unanswered. And the following night, the same scenario was replayed, leaving him helpless. The dawn, however, washed away the torments of his restless sleep. Only the purplish scars continued to mark his future. Until the day when Eleanor took a little rose oil and massaged the fragile, recovering skin. That evening he proposed to her.

The arrival of their first child was an earth-shattering event. For the first time in his life, he experienced panic. Truly. The kind that pins you to the wall, grabs you by the throat, crushes your lungs. Overwhelms you. An uncontrollable panic. Faced with the fragility of this child. His own vulnerability was one thing. While he'd hidden it from everyone, starting with his family, for many years, he was now no longer afraid to let it show. Occasionally. Slightly. But the thought of his son's mortality gripped his insides, twisting and never letting go. It was pointless trying to resist. He knew that he would never again see life as he had before. He felt he would never get over this loss. And yet.

And yet life had resumed its course. Faster than before. His frenzy for life, his urgency to fulfil his destiny, seemed to have increased tenfold. Strangely enough, his vision became clearer. His company was driven by an unprecedented momentum, an unquenchable impulse. A new dynamic of growth permeated each of his decisions. He multiplied the projects, the bold ventures and the challenges.

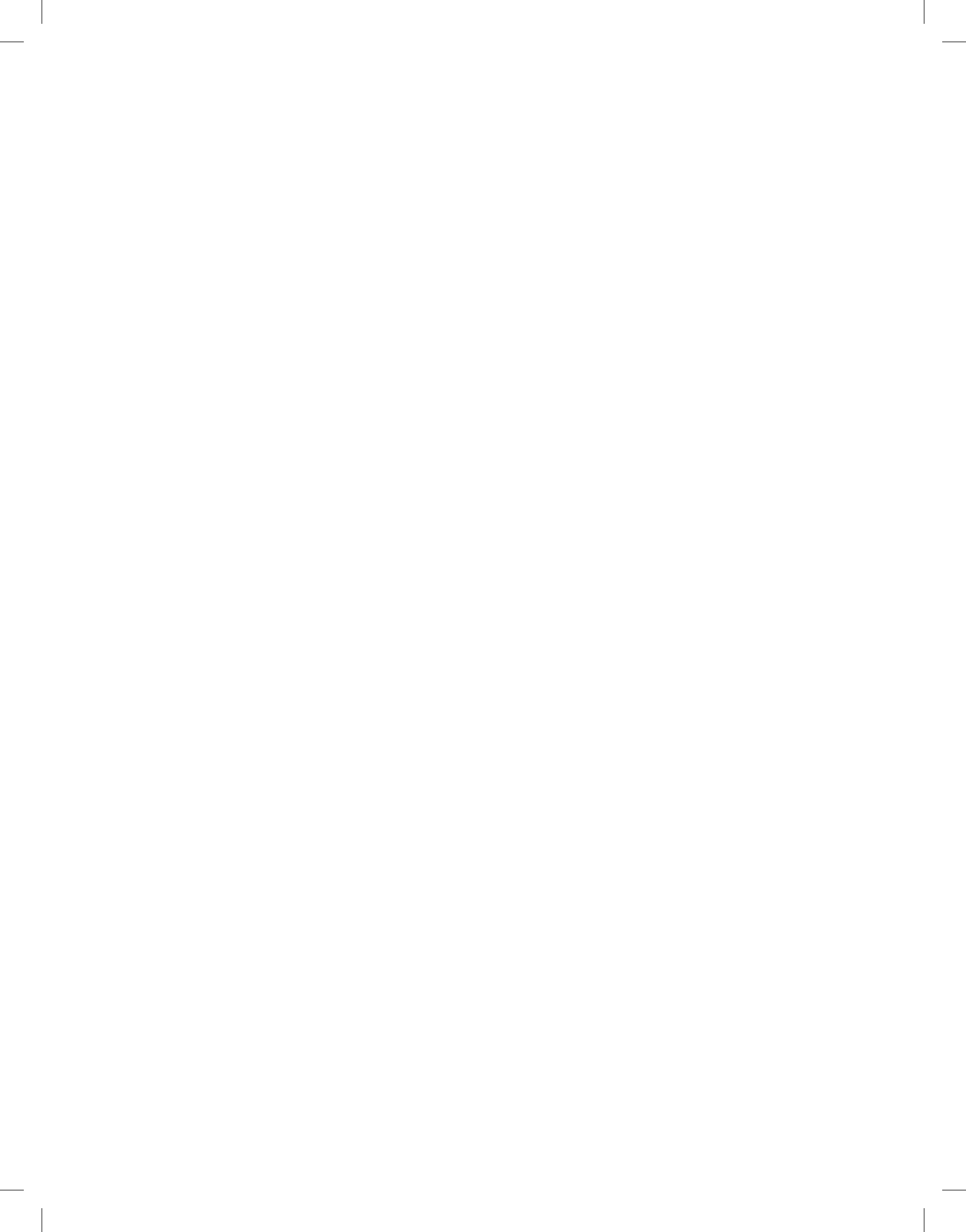
From afar, Jean observed him as he made connections with more and more people and entered into new partnerships. The company was growing in leaps and bounds. His friend's appetite for development left him both perplexed and in admiration. He wondered where he found such vitality, such pugnacity. The question remained unspoken. The contract of discretion was never breached between them.

Yes, his conviction stands firm. His confidence in his project, in his vision, remains unchanged. Sometimes, alone, behind his large desk, he looks back over the past. To measure how far he has come, and how far he still has to go. He thinks back to his architectural dreams, his bold plans, when he erected tons of scaffolding on the sides of so many buildings, around so many industrial complexes. The construction equipment,

the metal exoskeletons, the services, the dozens of companies that shape his group. Was this his destiny?

In the distance, he hears a muezzin calling for prayer. The five o'clock chant is the most melodious. This haunting melody is his favourite. He can almost smell the fragrance of the desert. Ochre sand sifts through his hand. A never-ending setting for a passage to be reinvented. Always. Over and over again.

On the ground, an ephemeral pyramid rises, majestic and fragile, towards the starry sky. Two stylized wings brush against it.











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