





SURPASSING YOURSELF

Surpassing Yourself

ACTES SUD



CONTENTS

PRELIMINARIES	9
INTRODUCTION	11
SURPASSING YOURSELF	13
DISCUSSION POINTS	15
Why or how do we become who we are?	
Notions of self and non-self and introductory thoughts on self-expression and self-development	16
<i>The notion of self</i>	18
<i>The notion of non-self, or muga (Japanese) or anātoman (Sanskrit)</i>	19
<i>Introductory thoughts on self-expression and self-development</i>	20
What does it mean to surpass yourself?	23
<i>Surpassing yourself: pushing your limits</i>	26
<i>Surpassing ourselves: what limits do we go beyond?</i>	28
<i>Surpassing yourself: what are the associated risks?</i>	36
<i>Surpassing yourself and efficiency</i>	39
SURPASSING YOURSELF – CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EMERGENCE, MAINTENANCE AND DEPLOYMENT	43
Altrad values	43
<i>Togetherness</i>	46
<i>Courage</i>	47
<i>Humility</i>	49
<i>Respect</i>	51
<i>Solidarity</i>	53
Global ethics	56
<i>Social responsibility</i>	58

<i>Social responsibility</i>	59
<i>Environmental responsibility</i>	59
Surpassing yourself, performance and business	
Altrad's performance is based on surpassing yourself	59
<i>Surpassing yourself: a necessity or nice-to-have?</i>	61
<i>Surpassing yourself: the essential characteristics of a performer</i>	65
<i>Surpassing yourself: the conditions for implementation</i>	67
Surpassing yourself, commitment and well-being at work	
Mastering the conditions for ecological performance for everyone	69
<i>Well-being and development – Expectations and our initial response</i>	69
<i>Surpassing ourselves in human terms – Creating the conditions for development and well-being</i>	70
<i>Surpassing ourselves economically – Creating growth</i>	72
<i>Surpassing ourselves ethically – Creating social, societal and environmental value</i>	75
<i>Surpassing ourselves us financially – Creating financial value for all</i>	78
CONCLUSION	81
REFERENCES	83
NARRATIVES	85
Surpassing yourself	87
Surpassing yourself – Creating human value	97
Altrad: surpassing itself in terms of its CSR approach	111
Surpassing yourself – Creating economic value	
Innovation, or how to inspire the future	125

PRELIMINARIES

At our seminar in April 2023, we explored the notion of optimism. Our work and reflections enabled us to validate the importance of cultivating an optimistic frame of mind, perhaps more so in volatile times, shaken by multiple crises. Indeed, the more uncertain or even threatening the future appears, the more essential it is to maintain a positive and optimistic attitude, both for Altrad's survival and for the physical and mental health of our employees.

Like optimism, surpassing ourselves has become an object of study and research. For a long time the concept was confused with heroism, which abounds in tales and legends, but it is now clearly distinguished – particularly in the organisational field – as an ability to cultivate continuous, sustainable and exceptional performances.

So following on from our work last year, we can take up this subject and adopt a strategic approach to surpassing ourselves, not only on an individual basis but also – and this is perhaps a more surprising approach – on a collective basis. How can we create the conditions for surpassing ourselves in ways that are both exceptional and respectful of our ever-fragile equilibrium?

For Altrad, the objective is twofold: (i) to continue to release the energy and commitment required to act in a competitive environment; and (ii) to contribute to the performance and sustainability of the organisation as a whole.

This document explores the notion of the self and the idea of surpassing yourself, to better understand its constituent elements and the conditions under which it arises. Drawing on the work of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists, the document highlights the mechanisms by which the desire to excel is created, the role of setting an example, the limits to fix in order to control the conditions for growth, and the role of each individual: managers, leaders and teams. It invites each of us to reflect on our personal relationship with excellence and surpassing ourselves. Collectively, it invites us to think out of the box, with the aim of creating a humane and ambitious workspace that elevates performance to the status of an art and a science.



INTRODUCTION

“Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.” These are the words of the poet and essayist T. S. Eliot on the subject of surpassing yourself, the art and science of performance that is first and foremost individual, but also collective.

The human desire to go beyond our limits is an ancient impulse. It has driven our species throughout history, resulting in our incredible intellectual faculties, our inventing the means to adapt to a world that we have constantly shaped thanks to increasingly powerful and sophisticated tools.

At once a source of anxiety – even terror – and fascination, the incentive to confront the unknown and the uncertain has created the conditions for uninterrupted progress, from prehistory to the present day. Of course, some might question this notion of progress, the consequences of which do not always reflect an improvement for everyone or for the planet. Nevertheless, there is a force at work that drives our species to dare to be adventurous, to brave challenges and overcome obstacles.

No area of knowledge or life seems to have escaped this drive for progress, whether in the sciences or the arts, the mind or the body. Over the centuries, the world – and us along with it – has been profoundly transformed. What once seemed insurmountable and inaccessible has now largely been surpassed or is in the process of being surpassed, such as the ability to travel through the air, to embark on long flights to other galaxies, to treat ailments that were once incurable, to master forces that were supposedly indomitable, such as nuclear fission and soon fusion, to understand the complexity of life under the sea and above it, to comprehend our origins long before we appeared on earth ...

The corporate world is also driven – carried even – by this desire to surpass ourselves, drawing in particular on the values of sport, for the energy and determination that drives us to do better every day, to aim ever higher, to constantly conquer new horizons.

Since its creation, the Altrad Group has never ceased pushing back its limits, whether in terms of size, turnover, workforce or activities. In times of prosperity as well as in periods of recession or crisis, it has stayed the course of continuous and sustainable development, which has led it to maintain reasoned and ambitious expansion.

Just ten years ago, the Group was one tenth the size it is today. Today there are nearly 65,000 of us, spread across almost every continent, working to ensure Altrad's success and influence throughout the world, wherever our customers call on us. Our extremely

dynamic internal growth is combined with external growth, resulting from a number of major companies joining the Group.

How have we managed to push beyond our limits, the ones we initially set ourselves, prompting us to define new ones, taking us further in the fulfilment of our *raison d'être*, in a drive for continuous improvement and the search for sustainable performance?

How did we manage to surpass ourselves, both personally and collectively? Without doubt, we have summoned the courage, perseverance, motivation and discipline needed to achieve our vision.

What was and still is the driving force behind this surpassing of ourselves? How have individual experiences fed our collective imagination and encouraged each of us, according to our own standards, to surpass ourselves? Are we still succeeding? And at what cost?

More generally, is the ability to excel an individual characteristic or is there a replicable and transferable – in other words, learnable – approach to performance?

What are the attributes of an achiever? What exactly do we surpass? To what end? Under what conditions? What would be the risk of renouncing the idea of surpassing oneself or – on the contrary – of making it an injunction?

We invite our leaders to reflect on these questions at our next seminar in April 2024.

We will attempt to define surpassing yourself, to identify its importance for Altrad's vitality, to understand its impact in terms of the performance and growth of our activities and, more generally, the creation of value. We will endeavour to identify the means of creating, supporting and maintaining this idea of going beyond. We will explore the special role played by leaders, wherever they operate within the Group, in driving progress and development for themselves and their teams.

Drawing on the work of researchers and thinkers (sociologists, psychologists, neuroscientists, philosophers, etc.), together we will reflect on the means and conditions that it is possible for us, as individuals but also as an organisation, to bring together in order to increase our individual and collective performance in a sustainable and reasoned way.

We are all invited to embark on an adventure to discover our full potential!

SURPASSING YOURSELF



DISCUSSION POINTS

Surpassing yourself involves (i) a notion that is its own object – that of the self – which poses certain semantic difficulties, and also (ii) a movement – the action of surpassing yourself – which implies the idea of a spatial or temporal boundary: What is the self? What is not the self? When are we ourselves? When are we no longer ourselves? Is the self immutable? Who goes beyond what or whom?

Intuitively, it is clear that surpassing yourself presupposes an initial reference point – the self – which it will be necessary to go beyond. Establishing this reference is not as easy as the simple statement “surpassing yourself” might suggest.

What is the meaning of “self”? Is it possible simply to define the self, to outline its contours, or even to propose a universal or at least a generic definition?

Is this notion the same as identity? In other words, is stating who I am (“I am me”) the same as declaring my identity? In French the Robert dictionary defines these two notions, which are often presented as synonyms, as follows:

- The self is “the personality of each individual”.
- Identity is the “character of what is one (unity), of what remains identical to itself (for things)”.

From a philosophical point of view, the notion of self presupposes self-awareness. It is our capacity to conceive of ourselves as distinct from others and from our environment, in other words, to be aware of ourselves. From this point of view, self-awareness is an intimate experience.

Specifically, what are we aware of? Of a substance, an essence or a set of properties? Of a whole or of certain elements that make it up? Of our existence, that is, our ability to feel alive in a given time and space? Character traits specific to who we are? The qualities and aptitudes of our bodies? Our history and the influences it has had on our identity? What happens inside us – our emotions, our feelings, our thoughts, our ideas – all of which manifest themselves in the course of our lives, sometimes by our own choice, sometimes beyond it?

It is possible to distinguish (i) our self-awareness, that is, our capacity as conscious, thinking creatures to produce reflections about ourselves (for example, my name is ..., I am a man, I work in such and such a place) and (ii) awareness of what is happening

within us, our thoughts, our emotional states, our physical feelings, our mental states (for example, I feel tired, I'm enthusiastic, I doubt my abilities, I think that and so on.

What is the process of consciousness? In what way are we conscious? Is it a mental process – the product of thinking about ourselves – or a pre-reflexive or non-reflexive experience, that is, independent of our reasoning about the ego that I am?

Can we be aware of ourselves in the absence of others? Is it possible to think of ourselves as individuals in the absence of our fellow human beings? For example, could a child who lived alone in the jungle after a plane crash and was never exposed to the human community conceive of themselves as belonging to the human race? Deprived of language, could they develop an articulate awareness of their existence and think about their own thoughts? Can we establish basic criteria and extended conditions capable of telling us that an individual is “truly” or “validly” self-aware?

Furthermore, the notion of self-awareness is distinct from that of self-knowledge. Self-awareness implies “omniscience” about who we are. “I” know who I am, how I feel and what my attributes are. But is this knowledge unquestionable? How do we know for certain that our perception is accurate and true to reality? If it seems easy to admit that what we feel is consistent with what we think we feel, how can we be sure that the statements we make about ourselves are accurate? For example, if we consider ourselves to be “weak”, do we reduce ourselves to weakness on the continuum of weakness/fear/strength/courage? Does this obliterate any possibility of courage? If we judge ourselves to be “intelligent”, does this mean that we act, have acted and will always act in a reasoned, appropriate and adequate manner, and that we are, have been and always will be capable of understanding complex new subjects?

So what is the self that we are led or invited, in certain circumstances, to go beyond? Is it an identity, an essence, a set of properties, an idea or representation we have of ourselves?

Let's begin this exploration by trying to define the notions of “self”, “non-self”, self-expression and self-development, before thinking about surpassing ourselves, the conditions and limits of this, in a performance-generating dynamic.

WHY OR HOW DO WE BECOME WHO WE ARE? NOTIONS OF SELF AND NON-SELF AND INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS ON SELF-EXPRESSION AND SELF-DEVELOPMENT

This is a huge question! Why or how do we become who we are? What does it mean to *be you*?

At the start was the connection. This sums up the importance of relationships in human development and existence, whether in relation to one's own self, to others or to the world. As other thinkers, such as neuropsychiatrists, affirm, relationships come first. The “I” is constructed through the “you” in a space we call “we”. So there is no such thing as self-awareness, and by extension, no such thing as the absolute self. As relational beings, belonging to a group species, we define ourselves, we construct ourselves, we exist

thanks to our fellow human beings, through our fellow human beings and in part for our fellow human beings.

However, it is important to remember that the way we understand the world – and our unique relationship with it – is largely influenced by our culture, and therefore by the language we speak and think in.

There are many differences and similarities between cultures. As food for thought and by way of example, we propose making a brief comparison between Western cultures, particularly European, and Eastern cultures, particularly Chinese and Japanese.

As a French sinologist has pointed out, “the Chinese universe differs from our own not only in its history, its social and political forms and its intellectual traditions, but also in its language, the obligatory instrument of thought. From the Bronze Age to the present day, the two extremities of the Eurasian continent, the West and the Far East, have developed in mutual ignorance and more or less independently. China’s first contacts with our pre-modern scientific traditions date from the early seventeenth century, and it was not until the late nineteenth century that certain currents of Western philosophy began to exert a real influence in China. Thus, there is some chance that the ways and means of thinking, the themes and the reflections on humanity and the world in China differ from those with which we are familiar.”¹

Broadly speaking, in Chinese culture, one of the “unthinkables” – that which is inaccessible to thought, which is outside its scope – concerns the freedom of the individual. In Chinese culture, the collective takes precedence over the individual. Individual freedom, which could run counter to the general interest, is not thought of as such, since the focus is on the group. The notion of the self is therefore of little interest (at least until recently).

By comparison, in our Western culture, individual freedom and, more recently, individualism – and with it the notion of the self – have become values, republican principles and even claims. Perhaps this explains the interest we take in personal achievement and surpassing oneself, when in other cultures the success of the collective, the nation, the homeland is given greater prominence and is more highly regarded.

In the West one of our major blind spots concerns the notion of movement, dynamics, the cohabitation of opposites or reverse notions that we struggle to bring into simultaneous tension. In Western thought, influenced in particular by Greek philosophy and René Descartes (who enshrined the principles of separation), reasoning tends to favour binarism: a thing is or is not. A situation is or is not. A person is like this or like that. The “or” is exclusive – you cannot be one thing and its opposite at the same time – whereas in Eastern thought “or” is “inclusive”: it is possible for opposing characteristics and attributes to coexist within the same entity, in a never-ending movement. These opposites are placed in tension, neither being favoured to the extent that the other is ignored.

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, although distinct, are three related religions, all tinged with traditional Chinese beliefs. Chinese tradition teaches that the world is kept in balance by the interplay of opposing and complementary forces, “yin” and “yang”. Although completely opposed to each other, like day and night, chaos and harmony, these forces govern the world. Human beings must therefore strive to live in harmony with them.

Notions of self and non-self coexist.

1. “References” for the note numbers can be found on p. 85.

The notion of self

In analytical psychology, the central concept of the self refers to all the knowledge that an individual possesses about their own self (that is, self-image), as well as the emotions that accompany it (self-esteem).

This knowledge about oneself is built up from a multitude of sources:

- Reflective awareness, that is the ability that an individual develops, from the age of 18 months, to distinguish themselves as an object that is from their environment.
- Inferences (for the record, an inference is an operation that consists of admitting a proposition because of its link with a previous proposition held to be true based on behaviour. A person can develop a self-concept based on their behaviour and the individual characteristics they attribute to it.
- Inferences based on emotions and feelings. An individual can attribute characteristics to themselves, and thus develop a self-concept, based on the emotions and feelings they experience in a given context.
- The relational self, that is, the self-concept that we construct on the basis of the reactions of others. For some neuropsychiatrists, for example, or Eastern philosophers, the relationship is primary. In other words, “I” can only be constructed in the presence of “you”. These reactions can influence our perception to the point of encouraging us to communicate with what we perceive to be the requested image, as a child might do when adapting their personality and behaviour to what they think adults expect of them, which British paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott conceptualised under the principle of the false self.

Sigmund Freud subdivided the psychic apparatus into three states, from which the self is distinguished:

- The ego: the most conscious part of the personality, always in contact with external reality. It is the result of a balance between the forces of the id and the superego.
- The superego, a kind of barrier built by our moral conscience which censors certain desires it deems inappropriate.
- The id, “a psychic state that, while superimposed on the concept of the unconscious, defines the impulsive role of the personality”.

For Carl Jung, the self is not only the centre but also the entire periphery, embracing the conscious and the unconscious. It is both the container and the psychic centre of being. “It is the source, the motor and the goal of the process of individuation that every human being should undergo over the course of their life – a process that should not be confused with that of individualisation. The latter allows the individual to become aware of their personality as a self. This process is necessary in the first instance to build a healthy ego, capable of adapting to life’s circumstances and anchoring itself in the reality of the outside world ... As soon as the ego gives way to the Self, appearances lose importance in favour of being, admiration of the ego (image worship) is replaced by recognition of the Self; the sensation of being unified within takes hold (due to the unconditional acceptance of all that is discovered within oneself); the feeling of being separate and opposed to others fades, giving way to a deep conviction of being connected (individuated but connected); others are no longer seen as objects to be controlled and taken advantage of, but as subjects to be met as equals.”²

According to some, such as the founder of the *École de la Posture Juste*, based in Brussels (Belgium), the Self, present before the appearance of the mind (that is, language), “is a notion that could be likened to Martin Heidegger’s *Dasein* – ‘being there’. It is the state of pure awareness with which the individual can identify when consciousness is simply and entirely aware of itself, a state that can only be reached when we are sufficiently attentive and at peace to unconditionally accept everything that is observed in the present moment.”³

Defining the self, then, presupposes that what is not the self, what is outside the self be outlined.

The notion of non-self, or *muga* (Japanese) or *anātoman* (Sanskrit)

The notion of non-self is originally a fundamental concept of Mahayana Buddhism. Within the word “*muga*” coexist “that which exists” and “nothing or nothingness”, in other words: that which is endowed with feeling and that which is devoid of it.

As a translation of Eastern (Buddhist) thought, grammar (in Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, etc.) makes it possible to include, to bring together, within a single concept, both a substantial and permanent entity (that which exists) and its absolute opposite, emptiness, that which does not exist. Or not yet ...

Western grammar struggles to achieve the semantic feat of combining two diametrically opposed concepts in the same word.

According to Eastern approaches, the things and beings that make up the world can be classified into five categories:

- perceptible forms: everything that has an external form, that is material beings (earth, water, fire, air, the five sense organs and their objects);
- sensations: what is produced by the sense organs and the mind, and which can be classified as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral;
- representations: notions based on perceptions;
- psychic constructs: schematically, the conscious and unconscious mind;
- thinking activities: apprehension (or even construction) of different objects through conceptual thinking.

In essence, these five sets are characterised by their changing, impermanent nature, which is designated by the concept of emptiness. The void is, in a way, the non-permanent and elusive character of these sets. It is the non-self.

This approach or vision of emptiness is not synonymous with “nothing” in the sense of existential emptiness, which can be understood in the words “everything is an illusion”. Emptiness underlines the ephemeral and changing nature of existence. It is an invitation to marvel at the elusiveness of both material things and living beings, which are in constant motion, in constant change, and can therefore never be defined in an absolute way or characterised in an ontological way. Things and beings escape conceptualisation. In other words, in terms of what we are interested in here – self-transcendence – “self” cannot be defined once and for all, since “self” is, by definition, in perpetual transformation.

Systems thinking, of which this author is a particular enthusiast, adopts a particular way of looking at the world – a paradigm – according to which beings and things are the fruit of networks resulting from their actions, or the product of networks of

interdependent causal chains, of links that have arisen. To put it simply, this paradigm enshrines the notion of interdependence: everything is linked, everything acts and can retroact on everything, in a community of existence made possible by a network of circular causal relationships. Everyone, directly or indirectly, participates in the creation of the whole and its constituent parts. Under the constant influence of these multiple forces, living beings and things change and evolve. Their nature is fundamentally non-permanent. The boundary of the self cannot therefore be defined once and for all.

Why this diversion into Eastern thought (wrongly presented here as unitary, and we apologise for this shortcut), which is so close to systems thinking? Perhaps because it allows us to see self-improvement as a movement, a dynamic. Self-transcendence can be understood and approached in terms of a certain duality.

Where Cartesian thought requires us to segment, partition and isolate, Chinese thought invites us to reunite, to accept the tension of opposites, the paradox of the coexistence of opposites.

How else can we answer these dizzying questions: If I go beyond myself, if I go beyond my self, am I still me? If “me” has changed, then when am I really me? Before my transformation, was I me? Was I really me? If every day some of my cells die and are renewed, when am I really me?

Am I more me now that I’ve demonstrated what I’m capable of, now that I know what I didn’t know? When am I complete, in the sense of accomplished? Is that when I can say that I am me? But then, who was I before? A fraction of myself?

Is it possible to be something other than yourself at every moment?

“I” changes under the influence of the context, but “I” composes with what it has within itself. The “I” cannot create from nothing. It uses what is present, perhaps dormant, just waiting to be activated in particular, even exceptional, circumstances. In this representation, an individual develops the characteristics with which they are endowed over the course of their existence.

Unless the individual is seen as an “empty” entity at birth, a receptacle to be filled by learning, which “fills up” with knowledge and know-how as it goes through life and the experiences it encounters.

Introductory thoughts on self-expression and self-development

The construction of the self continues to occupy thinkers. For many decades, the debate has centred on identifying the innate and the acquired.

Thus our identity would be the result, on the one hand, of our genetic heritage and, on the other, of our learning.

Broadly speaking, our behaviours can be divided into two main categories:

- Unconscious behaviours that we carry out without thinking, dictated by our survival instinct or acquired habits. Information processing is fast, efficient and automatic.
- Behaviour that is conscious, chosen, decided and thought through. Information processing is slower, more flexible, more creative and more reflexive.

Depending on the circumstances, we favour one behaviour or the other. If the situation is familiar, or requires an immediate reaction (danger), the automatic mode is activated (paleoencephalic and limbic areas of the brain). If the situation is new or complex, a generative mode is activated (neocortical or prefrontal areas of the brain).

Over the course of our lives, we memorise and forget innumerable experiences and construct a representation of the world, of others and of ourselves. We can distinguish between

- a self in the immediate present, perceiving its environment through its senses and the cerebral processing of information received; and
- an autobiographical self that perceives itself in the past, present and future on the basis of a narrative that has been built up over time.

Expressing who we are means

- our corporeality, the “body-object” (the physical body that encompasses our anatomical and physiological qualities manifested in vital anatomical-biological functions); and
- our physicality, the “subject-body” (the substantial substratum of the psychophysical whole of the living individual) that engages a persona, the one we have constructed (representation of who we are through beliefs and prejudices about ourselves, others and the world).

When we talk about surpassing ourselves, we need to consider which dimension we are talking about: the physical, mental, psychological or emotional dimension, bearing in mind that by virtue of their interweaving and interdependence, any action at one level will have consequences at another, resulting in multiple and complex feedback loops.

More recently, research into neuroscience, anthropology, biology, embryology, genetics, epigenetics, psychology and sociology, in particular, has shed new light on the construction of identity. Without going into the details of these highly technical and sophisticated disciplines here, let’s just say that an individual is born with a genetic capital that is expressed (or not expressed) according to the context in which they live.

The term epigenetics was coined in 1942 by the British biologist C. H. Waddington. His aim was to combine the worlds of genetics (remember that genes were discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century) and embryology within a single concept. Genetics is mainly concerned with the notion of heredity and the transmission of traits and characteristics from one generation to the next. Embryogenesis, now known as epigenesis, focuses on the formation of these traits during a living being’s development and has experienced significant growth since the early 2000s.

The discovery of DNA marked a fundamental turning point. As Edith Heard, a world expert in epigenetics and Director of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Heidelberg explains, each of our cells contains our entire genetic code. But they specialise, and become skin cells, muscle cells, neurons and so on. Epigenetics plays a part in regulating the expression of our genes, including the chemical modifications of DNA, which enable the body to acquire and retain its identity during development. Interestingly, these changes are not permanent; they are reversible. This means that there are changes in gene expression without any change in the DNA sequence. Epigenetic marks allow cells to acquire their identity without the DNA’s chemical transformation. These changes are both stable and reversible. They act like memories that can be passed on to subsequent generations of cells or erased.

This plasticity is also characteristic of the brain and its complex neural network, a field of intense electrical, energy and chemical exchanges. Because of this plasticity, the system of neuronal connections can be modified. In short, this means that it is possible to alter

our cerebral “wiring”, influenced by our behaviour, emotions and beliefs. These modifications will in turn have a feedback effect on our behaviour, emotions/feelings and beliefs/thoughts. We’ll come back to this formidable property of the brain when we think about putting the right conditions in place to support the changes we want to make.

These discoveries have had a fundamental impact on deterministic thinking, which for a long time held that we become who we are programmed to become at birth, without being able to alter the destination.

It should be noted, however, that the socio-economic context and, more broadly, the cultural context also play a part in the construction of our identity and partly determine our development (although this is not inevitable).

Why do we become who we are? This question, which serves as the subtitle of sociologist Gérald Bronner’s book *Les Origines*, is interesting in its very formulation. It implies that who we are is the product of evolution. We are the result of a process of transformation and change, at the end of which we become “ourselves”.⁴

From a conceptual perspective, however, this raises questions. Is an infant or child any less “self” than an adult? From the point of view of the adult who looks back on their past, it is possible that they have a feeling and memory of their evolution and the progress made; and therefore an impression of progressive completion in the course of their existence. But from the child’s point of view, depending on their age, it is possible for them to have the sense, if not the awareness, of being truly “themselves”. Does this mean that we can consider that we are “ourselves” from a certain level of development? If so, what is the point at which we can consider ourselves “complete” or accomplished?

Within Bronner’s lines there are two major ideologies in conflict. On the one hand, there is the genetic whole which, as indicated above, would irremediably determine our destiny and the construction of our identity, which would simply be the expression of the unfolding of a genetic programme from which we could not escape. On the other hand, there is the social whole, which could be broken down into (i) the social-familial mode according to Freudian and Oedipal psychoanalytical thinking (our parents being responsible for our traumas and our ills); and (ii) the social-collective mode ascribed to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the French philosopher Michel Foucault, whereby society, and more broadly the culture attached to it, determines our identity development and, as such, is responsible for the success or failure of our social progression.

From a systemic point of view, each of these propositions contains elements of truth, and therefore of falsehood, because none of them, in an absolute sense, has explanatory force on its own, since reality cannot be validly described by any one of them taken in isolation. It is in their complementarity that relevance is created.

Bronner, a “transclass” product (or class defector) as he sometimes defines himself, rightly recalls the shame regularly associated with the status of these transclasses, who have managed to rise above their condition and gain access to a socio-economic world perceived as more prestigious, if not more enviable. The shame of their origins, shame of not mastering the codes of a certain segment of society, multiple shames like so many pebbles in the shoe of self-esteem which, sometimes, urge them to extract themselves from their environment and surpass themselves. Surpassing yourself as a way of overcoming socio-cultural origins. We’ll come back to this later.

The construction of the self is not just the result of the expression of genes and the work of parental and societal forces. It is also the fruit of the socially conveyed doxa (doxa can be defined as the more or less homogeneous set of opinions, confused or relevant, popular or singular prejudices, generally accepted presuppositions, evaluated positively or negatively, on which any form of communication is based) which can create the conditions for self-fulfilling prophecies. As a reminder, the work of American psychologist Robert Rosenthal has shown the influence of projections on individuals – the Rosenthal or Pygmalion effect – by virtue of which an individual declared by another to be capable sees himself as such and therefore “becomes” capable, and conversely, an individual judged to be “incapable” will tend to agree with the judgement and gradually atrophy their abilities. This is a new avenue to explore when we talk about surpassing yourself.

In the ever mysterious process of building a self, there is perhaps also the role of chance, of the fortuitous, of the unexpected, of events that are as unexpected as they are decisive, thanks to which this construction takes an unpredicted and unforeseen turn. This is what sociologist Norbert Alter calls “fairies”, people who seem to see in you the destiny that could be yours and help you ... Alter explains that the gifts he received made him feel indebted and that he had to succeed in return. This social generosity, from which he sometimes benefited, instilled in him an injunction to reciprocate. These moments, often isolated, one-off or brief, can leave an indelible mark on our development and transform us forever. They bear witness to the strength of emulation between individuals, and the power of example and support that certain people bring to our personal and professional lives. We will explore this further below.

Finally, we should remember that self-awareness is the product of thought, and therefore of a language, a narrative. And the story we tell about ourselves, like any story, can be changed to create the possibility of another future. Here, transcending ourselves means adopting a new way of putting who we are into words.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SURPASS YOURSELF?

The concept of surpassing yourself is often approached from the angle of

- the preconditions that facilitate it, make it possible;
- what it is intrinsically, that is, a crossing or pushing back of limits; or
- the consequences we attach to it: success, victory, transformation and so on.

The question of surpassing yourself presupposes (i) on the one hand temporality, which unfolds between the origin, the departure – where I come from, where I am now – and a destination, an arrival – where I want to go, who I want to be, and (ii) on the other hand a movement, a dynamic, to shift from one to the other.

“Why did I become who I am?” This question looks at the chronological sequence of causes and events that contribute to the construction of each of us. In other words, what are the reasons behind the shaping of my identity, the causes that explain why I am who I am (or think I am). It’s a question that is as legitimate as it is intellectually interesting. It presupposes that there are founding events, identifiable causes that are isolated or even unique (in terms of their explanatory value) and more significant than others (also experienced or encountered in the course of our lives) that are capable of explaining the

way in which our personality has been constructed. For example, if I'm shy today, it's because when I was eight a teacher made fun of me in front of the whole class. Or if I've committed theft, it's because when I was a child my family was poor and I have some revenge to take. There are many more examples of supposedly direct links between causes and effects.

According to the systemic logic that I have favoured for many years, the preferred question is: "How did I become who I am?" which takes into consideration (i) the multiplicity of factors and circular causes (meaning those that retroact on each other) to which we are exposed and (ii) the relationships that we maintain with certain of these factors that we choose to retain, that we make significant and that influence our reactions and decisions.

The events and situations to which we are exposed are innumerable, interdependent, diverse in nature, and of varying importance to us. We remember only a tiny fraction of them: those that have directly or indirectly aroused a particular emotion, those that "fit" with the story we tell about our own lives and with the description of our identity, those that we consider remarkable, worthy of interest, and that we choose to remember, those that are reconstructed by our brains over the years.

They give rise to a series of decisions which in turn influence our interpretation of what has happened, is happening or will happen to us.

Imagine a young teenager standing on a rock from which he can jump into the sea three metres below. His perception of height is conditioned by:

- its location (the top of the rock is three metres above sea level);
- his own experience of jumping: Has he jumped before? If yes, what happened?
- physical condition;
- his perception of danger and his appetite for risk;
- the context of the challenge in which he finds himself: Who does he choose to measure himself against? What is he trying to prove?

Now imagine that this teen is afraid to jump. After many minutes, urged on by his friends, he finally decides to jump.

- Finally, he realises that the fall is very short and that the dive into the sea is pleasant. Perhaps he's telling himself that it wasn't all it was cracked up to be and that what he had previously called "the jump of death" is in fact a very ordinary dive. He's ready to do it all over again.
- On the contrary, perhaps he feels that it took immense courage to throw himself into the void. Once in the water, he savours what he calls a victory. But he's not sure he wants to do it again, because he remembers the fear he felt and doesn't yet know if he wants to expose himself to it again.
- Or maybe the fall went really badly. When he jumped, he hit a rock and injured himself. He knows now that he'll never do it again, that he was careless, that he shouldn't have let himself be influenced by his friends and that he should have listened to the adults who advised him against jumping.

On the other hand, let's imagine that this young teenager has no fear of jumping. Better still, he runs onto the rock and leaps into the void, shouting with joy.

- As soon as he's in the water, he's already thinking about getting back on the rock to repeat the jump and the feeling of jubilation that accompanies it.
- Now he wants to "do something harder" and climb a more impressive rock with a five metre drop into the sea.
- His jump didn't go so well: he flattened out on his back and is struggling to get back to the shore, as the pain is so severe. He's struggling to catch his breath and doesn't feel like jumping at the moment.

This multifaceted example aims to show just how much the way we approach life and the situations we encounter is conditioned by a multitude of factors, some identifiable, others more difficult to name, which belong to our history, what we have memorised (that is, constructed), what we remember of it at the time and what we project for the future. Like any (major) decision, the choice to surpass ourselves is largely influenced by these elements from our past, present and future.

Let's transpose this situation to the professional world. A public presentation, a difficult conversation with a colleague, a crucial meeting with a client, a task to be carried out alone for the first time, a complex decision ... there are many challenging occasions that require us to overcome our apprehension or even our fear, that require us to show courage, that potentially expose us to stress not only before, but also during and sometimes after the situation in question.

How do we react? What determines our reactions? Can we influence what we feel or think? How can we do this?

Is it acceptable to decline the challenge offered to us, to avoid exposing ourselves to what frightens us? Or on the contrary, does our role require us to overcome our reluctance and apprehension? Is it enough to "jump" into the void?

Are there intermediate stages that enable us to gradually build up our skills and strengthen our self-confidence? Do we have the time and resources to put them in place?

What do we do when nothing has prepared us for exceptional circumstances (a natural disaster, a mechanical or chemical accident or a sudden crisis, for example) and we still have to react and decide as best we can, despite our fear, fatigue or uncertainty?

Surpassing ourselves seems to lie at the crossroads of our "identity", our "self", exposed to a particular environment that colours the present, the past and the future, and challenged by an objective, a mission, an emergency: to set a world record, to do something unprecedented, to make significant progress, to save ourselves from a perilous situation. It says something about our ability to show ourselves – in our own eyes and/or those of others – to be bigger, stronger, bolder, braver, more tenacious, etc.

Is there a predisposition to going beyond yourself? In other words, are some of us better candidates for surpassing ourselves because of our possession or mastery of certain attributes? Are those who surpass themselves competitors, competitive beings driven by a powerful desire to win, to come first? Can we draw a parallel between self-improvement and heroism?

Are there individuals destined for a fate that commands respect and admiration? Are we all equal when it comes to the opportunity to excel? Is there such a thing as meritocracy? How much of success is down to the individual and how much can be attributed to the context in which they evolve, to the people and experiences encountered in the course of their lives?

Do some cultures and eras encourage people to go beyond their limits, while others try to restrict them in the name of a collective that prevails over individualism?

Are there circumstances that are conducive to surpassing oneself, such as war, disaster or adversity, which reveal to us and to others a part of our personality or qualities that were previously hidden or ignored? Were it not for these opportunities, which push some to surpass themselves, would we see such a surpassing of ourselves?

Do you have to decide to go beyond yourself to exceed your limits? Is going beyond a choice or a consequence? Is it necessary to be aware of an objective, an ambition, and to try to achieve the former or the latter? Can we surpass ourselves “unknowingly”, outside our initial desire and associated strategy?

Is it possible to create the conditions to surpass ourselves individually or collectively?

The questions are as numerous as they are legitimate. Let’s try to define surpassing yourself in order to explore its application within the Altrad Group and its presence in our culture.

Surpassing yourself: pushing your limits

Is *surpassing* yourself pushing back limits or *one’s own* limits? Whether they are (initially) external or internal, it seems that surpassing yourself implies pushing back internalised limits that we have made our own, that we feel we impose on ourselves.

From the point of view of each individual’s evolution, between the moment of our birth and that of our death, it is possible to look at our existence as a succession of self-improvements, since we do not remain in our initial infant state. We grow physically, intellectually and emotionally as a result of our biology and the experiences to which we are exposed.

Some of these changes occur naturally, gradually, without us even having to think about or initiate them. Others, on the other hand, require a will, a desire, a decision to move from one shore to the other. We leave a comfort zone, the one in which we feel comfortable, to enter a development zone, the one in which we feel challenged.

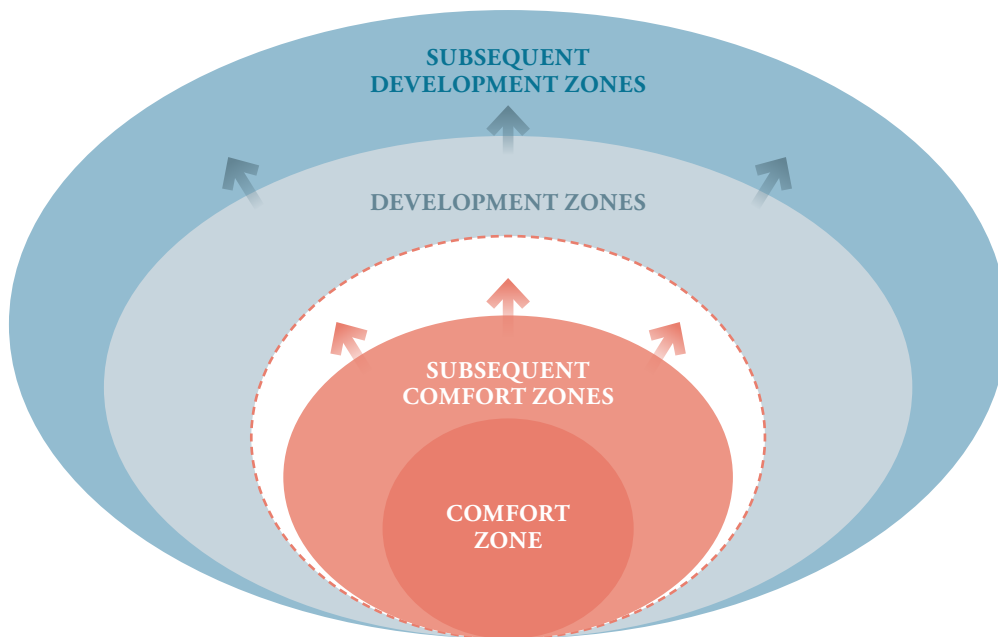


The comfort zone can be defined as a space and time when our means, our resources, are aligned with our objectives.

The development zone can be defined as a space and time where means and objectives are not yet aligned where we are working towards their convergence.

As the diagram above illustrates, surpassing yourself can therefore be understood as going beyond current limits (those surrounding the comfort zone), whether real or supposed, towards the definition of new limits (those surrounding the development zone).

Each experience, the acquisition of new expertise and skills, the strengthening or broadening of our resources, constantly modifies the location of the boundary between our comfort zone and our development zone. As these experiences unfold, our comfort zone expands, potentially pushing back the boundaries of our development zone even further, in a process of continuous growth.



Nevertheless, when we think of surpassing ourselves, we may think of an extraordinary evolution, compared to a natural, slow, progressive evolution. It's a bit like attaching the idea of a quantum leap to the concept of surpassing yourself, a break that signals the extraordinary passage from one state to another.

Whether progressive or brutal, surpassing yourself *presupposes the application of* mental (intellectual, physical and emotional) forces to overcome one's own limitations, whether physical, emotional, cultural or educational.

How do these boundaries shift? Under what conditions is it possible? Does it require specific qualities, particular character traits, singular conditions?

No doubt when we talk about surpassing ourselves, we immediately conjure up related notions: courage, tenacity, endurance, perseverance, resistance, resilience, transcendence, excellence and so forth.

Surpassing yourself, that is, going beyond one's own limits, seems to be synonymous with:

- silencing certain beliefs, that is limiting beliefs;
- overcoming your fears;
- getting over doubts;
- combatting feelings of powerlessness;
- optimising potential;
- developing skills or abilities;
- acquiring new skills;
- growing by developing our humanity (intellectually, emotionally, physically, even spiritually);
- competing with yourself;
- getting out of your comfort zone, out of your current condition.

Surpassing yourself means (I) doing what you haven't been able to do before, (II) doing what you've never done before because the circumstances haven't arisen, and/or (III) doing what you thought you couldn't or shouldn't do.

Surpassing ourselves: what limits do we go beyond?

*"It is almost always out of vanity
that we show our limits."*

ANDRÉ GIDE

The French dictionary Le Robert defines a limit as (i) a line that separates two contiguous lands or territories; (ii) the extreme part where a surface or area ends; (iii) the extreme term (beginning or end) of a space of time; (iv) (figuratively) the point that cannot or must not be exceeded by the influence or action of something; (v) (mathematics, philosophy) a fixed magnitude that a variable magnitude can approach indefinitely without reaching it (asymptote); (vi) extreme possibilities (physical or intellectual).

The limits can be

- physical or abstract;
- external or endogenous;
- real or supposed.

The limits we sometimes have to overcome in order to keep moving forward, get out of a tricky situation, or achieve the goals we have set ourselves or accepted can fall into several categories: physical or biological, emotional or affective, conceptual or intellectual, cultural or religious, material or temporal, and sometimes all at the same time.

What's more, there are different degrees and levels of limits, which can be perceived as easy, difficult or even impossible to go beyond.

Is a limit a limit in itself, in absolute terms, with a degree of difficulty common to all? Or are the obstacles that each of us may encounter subjectively, perceived by each individual in terms of their nature and level of difficulty? This would mean that what is decisive is the relationship we have with the limit.

While some may find it difficult, if not impossible, to train their body and mind to run a marathon, others may find the effort accessible, as they condition themselves and even prepare for triathlons!

How do they differ? Their physical condition? Their life experiences? The way they train? Their relationship with effort, pain, self-sacrifice and discipline? The support and encouragement they receive from those around them? Their belief that certain challenges are out of their reach or that, on the contrary, anything is possible (the sky's the limit)? Their pessimism or, on the contrary, their unfailing optimism? Their level of confidence in themselves, in others and/or in life?

What is necessary is what, in other words, must be.

What is impossible is what absolutely cannot be.

In philosophy, we distinguish between the impossibility of essences and the impossibility of actions.

- The essential impossibility is “that which cannot be because of the essence of two mutually exclusive things”. For example, a square circle, hot ice, an upward fall. Thinking one necessarily rejects the other.
- The impossibility of actions determines what may or may not be, depending on particular criteria. For example, using a light bulb was impossible before the invention of electricity; being physically in Paris and Beijing at the same time is impossible; the impossibility of actions is variable. What was impossible yesterday – for example performing open-heart surgery in the Middle Ages – or today, may become possible tomorrow. Or what is impossible under certain conditions, such as water freezing at 30°C, becomes possible as soon as the temperature drops to 0°C or below.

“Absolute” limits

By definition, an absolute limit is a universal limit, which applies to everyone and everything, regardless of time or place. It is intangible. It cannot be deviated from.

An absolute limit can also be defined as an invariant, that is, a limit which in a given space-time does not vary but could do so under certain conditions (which had not previously arisen).

→ Biological or physiological limits

The logic behind sport – a major inspiration to the corporate world – is essentially based on the notion of surpassing yourself. Sport is all about beating existing records (your own and those of others), pushing beyond your own physical and mental limits, setting new benchmarks and achieving ever greater feats.

This is based on the efforts and training of athletes, but also on technological, technical, scientific and medical developments that support their performances.

The social environment also plays a part in this movement: the more society values performance and achievement, the more it encourages people to surpass themselves (at least to an extent and for certain individuals).

It has to be said that sporting performances have continued to improve almost constantly over the centuries and since records were institutionalised by international sporting bodies. Each new record pushes back the limits that were previously thought to be insurmountable, sometimes even defying common sense and logic.

Is it conceivable that this continuous surpassing of limits could be endless? Is it possible to push back the limits and improve performance *ad infinitum*? Does the saying, so well-known in finance, “Trees don’t grow to the sky” hold true?

On the other hand, is it reasonable to impose an absolute limit on human performance when over the years we see record after record being broken in so many sporting disciplines?

It should be noted, however, that when it comes to performance, it seems that the margins for increasing records are tending to diminish. Mathematical models for predicting sports performance that are based on “an asymptotic curvilinear function all describe a limit to the increase in records whose asymptote fixes the value”⁵

However, other linear models show a constant, and therefore theoretically infinite (!), progression, which seems to defy the laws of nature. Unpredictable and improbable feats (such as the performance of runner Usain Bolt, who runs at a top speed of 44.72 km/h) would prove them right.

However, when it comes to human performance, there are two very real biological, or physiological, limits: structural and functional.

Structural physiological limits, such as (i) the resistance of muscular, bone, cartilage, ligament and aponeurotic tissues to rupture or (ii) muscle typology, which varies between individuals (heredity) and over the course of our lives, and conditions our ability to produce rapid movements, and functional limits, such as the greater or lesser synchronisation of movements (efficiency of the kinematic chain), determine the precision and speed of execution of the sports gesture. To this we should add organic aptitudes, such as heart rate, which influence resistance and endurance.

With the help of technology, changes in training and living conditions (diet, sleep, general health, etc.), the limits are being pushed back by certain athletes. But just how far?

Could there be a risk in this trend towards continuous improvement? That of considering that the extraordinary performance of an exceptional athlete who has managed to achieve a feat, has become the new standard, the yardstick against which all performances must henceforth be measured and evaluated? The logic of records is that if they are beaten, they become obsolete.

What can – sometimes – be left out of the discussion is that a single record, set by an individual or a team at a given moment, does not (necessarily) reflect the skills of the greatest number. This raises twin issues: (i) transferability – what can be taught and learned in order to create the conditions for setting an identical performance or a new record and (ii) reproducibility – how can such a performance be repeated?

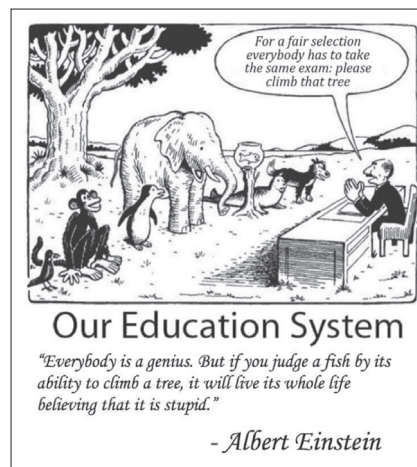
In fact, for these records to have been set, they have benefited from an exceptional combination of factors (temperature, terrain, sleep, training, etc.) that are not always easy to reproduce. Is it fair to make this the goal for as many people as possible? Even worse (or better?), the foundation on which every performance and every new record should be built from now on?

By way of comparison, in a company, should the performance of an exceptional year become the absolute benchmark against which future performance is measured? How far can an organisation grow? Is there a limit – even a temporary one – to a team’s performance? How can a company create the conditions for its ongoing development, which necessarily follows on from that of its employees? Is there a point at which it runs the risk of breaking off, of disengaging its teams who are under too much pressure (stress,

fatigue, or even exhaustion or burn-out, discouragement, etc.)? But how can you continue to motivate everyone to achieve individual and/or collective success (a culture of victory, of surpassing yourself, of achievement, etc.)?

Perhaps one avenue to explore is that of the unique relationship that each organisation has with these notions of growth, development and excellence, and the human, organisational, financial and cultural resources that it is prepared to commit to these ends (see our 2018 and 2019 seminars in particular).

The cartoon to the right illustrates the absurdity of a system that establishes common standards for all, irrespective of unique specificities, and that hastily and arbitrarily assesses the quality of the participants on the basis of a single, partial evaluation system:



→ The absolute limits we set ourselves

We can be subject to two types of limits:

- Those imposed on us, such as the laws of nature (physical, biological and even psychological limits), over which we have little or no influence. For example, the law of gravity applies to everyone and everything on earth. However, it can be thwarted under certain conditions (in a plane, a rocket, in an artificial weightless environment, etc.).
- Those we set for ourselves and declare to be absolute and insurmountable (laws, internal rules, cultural principles, etc.) and that are likely to change over time as society, mentalities, technical and medical progress evolve, etc.

In business, the question could be: are there absolute limits to performance, to what can be achieved? In other words, are there technical, financial, ethical/legal, biological or cognitive limits that can't be crossed or that we decide can't be crossed?

It is possible to imagine a group defining for itself the limits within which it intends to operate. Outside this framework, a given behaviour – considered dangerous or inappropriate – would become proscribed or forbidden, while within the framework, another given behaviour would be encouraged.

So a company, through its culture, its principles, its written internal rules, its implicit rules and meta-rules, demarcates the boundaries:

- in which action is considered possible, welcome and desirable and is therefore encouraged; and
- beyond which action is deemed impossible, inappropriate or unacceptable, and is therefore discouraged or even prohibited.

A relative limit – for example, what is accepted in another culture, another country, another time – is thus set as an absolute limit for the company, at a given moment. We are thinking here of racist or sexist comments and behaviour which may at one time

have been accepted, then tolerated, and which are now banned and punished in many organisations and countries.

In the same way, cronyism or acts of corruption that may have existed or continue to exist in certain cultures and have been/are accepted as part of the balance of the system (mechanisms for redistribution and/or better sharing of wealth) are increasingly being combated and strictly punished as a result of the development of good governance practices and the fight against corruption.

Assumed limits: limiting beliefs

“Self-trust is the first secret of success.”

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

“They did not know it was impossible so they did it.”

MARK TWAIN

The French dictionary Le Robert defines a belief as the action of believing something to be true, probable or possible. It can be understood as certainty, conviction or faith. In other words, belief is the act of considering a thought as true, as belonging to or defining the truth.

A belief exists independently (to a certain extent at any rate) of the facts that corroborate or contradict it. So we can hold something, an idea or a thought to be true whether or not it has been scientifically or empirically proven, and whether or not it is supposed to be true, even if the facts indicate otherwise. A belief is a thought that is conceived as true, indubitable, real.

A belief may concern yourself, others or the world in general. Its object may be a person (or a group of people), an abstract concept (a value, an idea), a fact (an action, a real situation, etc.).

A belief can therefore be

- linked to the self; it is an expression of what I consider to be true about myself, the idea I have of myself: I’m curious, I’m rubbish, I’m lucky, etc.
- related to others; it is an expression of what I consider to be true about people in general or about individuals in particular: my colleague is stupid, men are vile, people are mean, humans are good, etc.
- related to the world; it is an expression of what I consider to be indisputable about the world, life and society: the earth is flat, success is having money, no gain without pain, etc.

It is an elaboration of what I think about myself, others and the world, based on my perceptions and the cognitive, emotional and experiential processing I do with them.

It can also concern, by extension, my objectives (my professional objectives are realistic or unattainable), the means at my disposal (I am poor, rich, in a secure situation, I am competent to carry out this task and so on.), the stakes to which I am subject (if I fail, I die, I have the right to make a mistake, etc.).

As a brief reminder, in system logic, we consider that we only have access to the world through our sensations and language. What refers to the essence of a thing is therefore

eminently relational, subjective and cultural. By way of illustration, we might recall what David Hume (*Of the Standard of Taste*, 1757) wrote about beauty: “Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty.” Observation is a function of the observer. It is a projection. What is observed is conditioned by who is observing, from what place, at what time or moment.

A limiting belief can be observed and identified by the consequences it has on our behaviour, our decisions and our actions. As soon as a belief – that of an individual or a team – has the effect of devaluing or limiting what we allow ourselves or what we dare to do, or even prevents any action that is judged a priori to be futile, it can be considered limiting.

It is now accepted that our certainties, convictions and beliefs have considerable influence on our behaviour and therefore our effectiveness, in one direction or another.

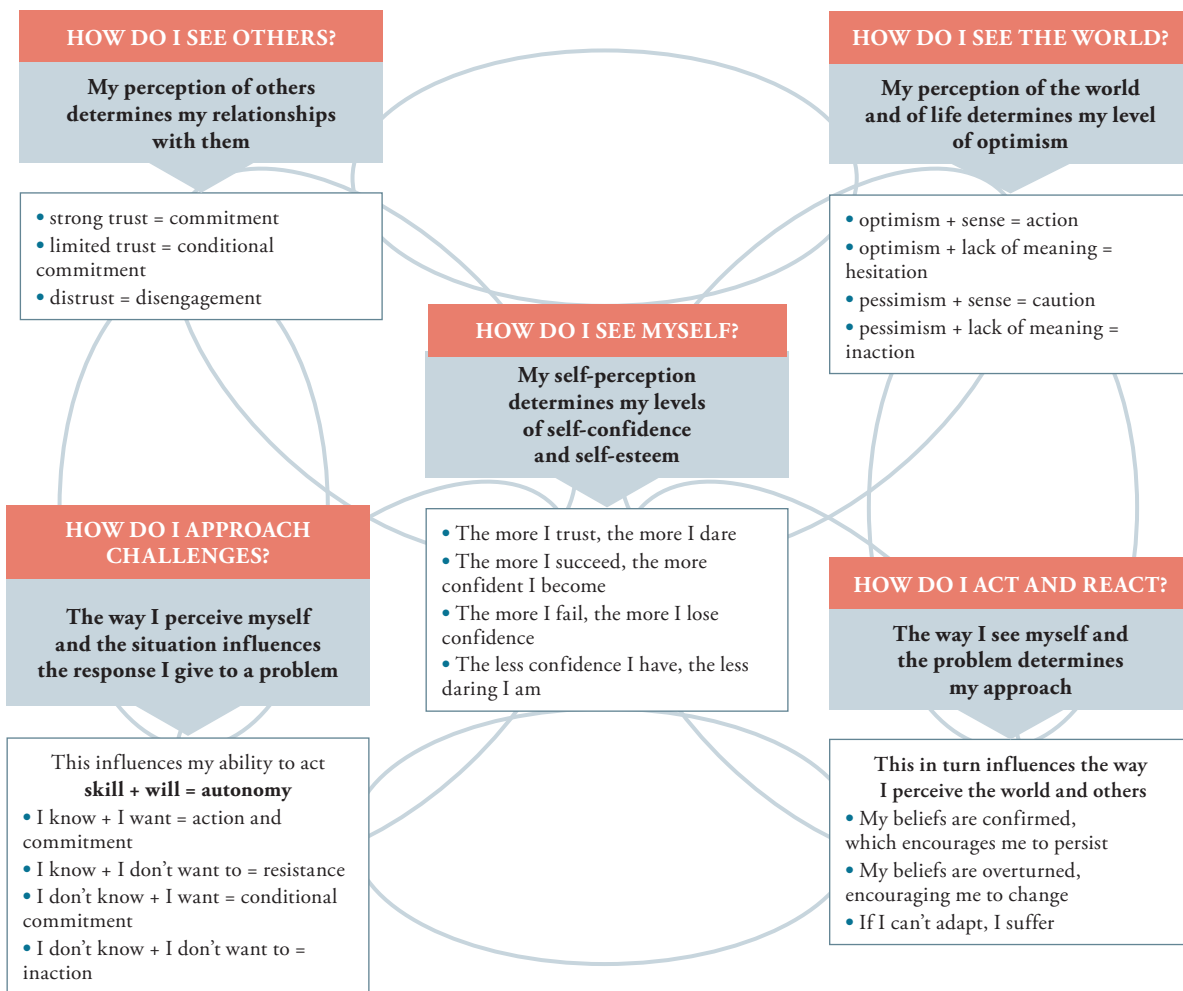
We might recall the studies carried out in the 1960s by the American psychologist Robert Rosenthal, which highlighted the Pygmalion effect. In concrete terms, the aim was to show the influence of teachers’ expectations and prejudices on students’ results. The students were divided arbitrarily (or randomly) into two groups of equal numbers. The teachers were informed that the students had been allocated according to academic criteria. The teacher in the first group was told that their pupils were gifted. The teacher of the second group was told that their pupils were slower learners. After a year, the students’ results were assessed again. The students deemed to be the most capable academically had progressed, while those deemed to be less capable had regressed! The aim of this experiment was to show the impact of a teacher’s beliefs about their students on the latter’s ability to learn.

So while the conviction that we are incapable or that failure is inevitable can create the conditions for failure, on the other hand, ignorance of the impossibility allows us to dare to do, and by doing the impossible, to open up the field of possibilities at the same time.

According to Robert Dilts (American author, trainer and consultant, and father of neuro-linguistic programming), limiting beliefs mainly relate to three themes:

- Devaluation: A person who devalues themselves, doubts their worth or is convinced that they have no worth at all or not enough. They may feel that they don’t deserve to get what they want or aspire to.
- Impotence: Someone who feels powerless to achieve the goal they have set themselves or that has been set for them, even if they recognise that the goal is realistic and achievable for others.
- Despair: Despair arises when a person (or a group of people) considers it impossible or futile to achieve a given objective, either (i) because they consider that it will not have the desired impact or make any difference (pessimism about the expected effects: “it’s not worth the effort”, “it won’t make any difference”, “all is irretrievably lost”), or (ii) because they are convinced that their personal action will be ineffective or insufficient (“it’s out of my control”).

As we discussed at the Altrad 2022 seminar, our ability and willingness to act depend on our unique relationship with ourselves, with others and with the world.



Let's take a look at Seligman's approach, which we discussed last year. Keen to go beyond a mechanical approach to living beings, Seligman tried to understand how our psyche influences our attitude to life. He thus succeeded in defining two "typical" profiles: that of the pessimist and that of the optimist.

In his opinion,

- A pessimist is someone who, when something bad happens to them, believes three things: (I) it's permanent, it's going to last forever; (II) it's contagious, it's going to undermine everything I do; (III) it's uncontrollable, there's nothing I can do about it.
- An optimist, when something bad happens to them, thinks (I) it's temporary; (II) it only concerns this situation; and (III) I can do something about it.

In a world that is changing rapidly, extensively and uncertainly, the need for everyone to adapt is paramount. This adaptation also concerns our ability to update the beliefs that we have built up and maintain about ourselves. They are the fruit of our family upbringing, our schooling and the teachers we have met, the opinion leaders in society, the friendships we have made ...

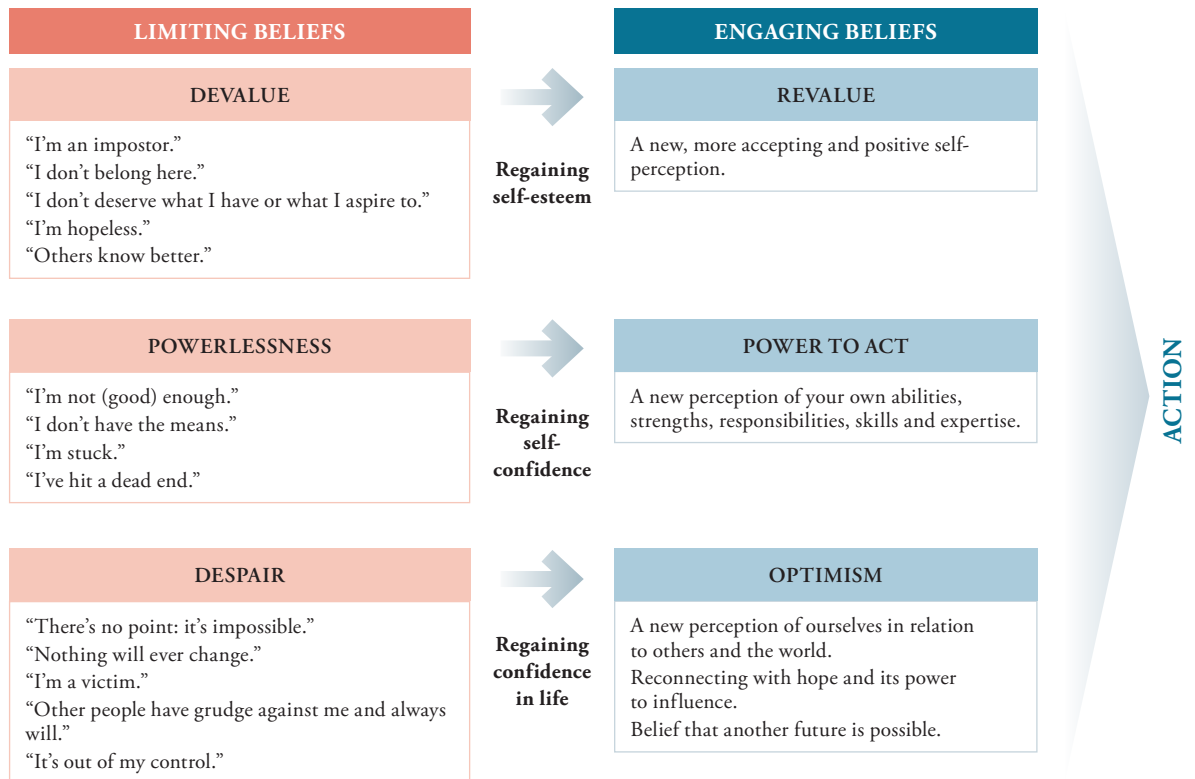
Is it possible to restructure these beliefs, to unlearn something about ourselves, others and the world, and to replace beliefs that have become obsolete and/or disabling?

Breaking out of, moving through, updating or transforming a limiting belief involves

- becoming aware of it (a priori or a posteriori);
- identifying and recognising the underlying positive intention;
- identifying the unconscious, non-verbalised presupposition, the assumption underlying the belief;
- broadening perception by adopting other angles/points of view;
- questioning the chains of cause and effect that we hold to be true and explanatory (i) by questioning simple, linear equivalences; and (ii) by favouring a more complex, circular approach (several causes can produce the same effects; one cause can produce several effects; effects can have a retroactive effect on causes);
- seeking out or accepting information that enables us to consider alternatives to the belief and how to act differently;
- envisaging the possibility of an alternative future, to regain hope in the future;
- creating a positive support network around us, to clarify and update the key relationships that help give meaning to our mission, our project, our objective.

In short, we need to transform limiting beliefs into engaging beliefs that

- imply a certain optimism or hope for the future;
- re-establish a sense of ability and responsibility;
- restore a sense of personal worth and belonging to a supportive and caring group.



This allows you to change your thoughts, your emotional state or your behaviour, whatever the order of transformation (thoughts, then emotions, then behaviour) or (behaviour, thoughts then emotions) or (emotions, thoughts then behaviour), in order to rebuild a new belief that is more conducive to self-esteem, self-confidence and, subsequently, action.

Surpassing yourself: what are the associated risks?

Is pushing yourself “bad” in itself? Is it a vain and dangerous flight into the unknown? Should it be avoided or, on the contrary, is it desirable or even inevitable? What are the risks and benefits of surpassing yourself?

The risk of endangerment

By definition, we know that we have moved a limit, a frontier, a boundary when we are “still alive” beyond the initial limit. What used to be a boundary is no longer a boundary. The boundary has moved.

On the other hand, we only know that we have exceeded an “absolute”, intangible limit (what some refer to as a “real” limit) once that limit has been crossed and the consequences of that crossing are irreversible.

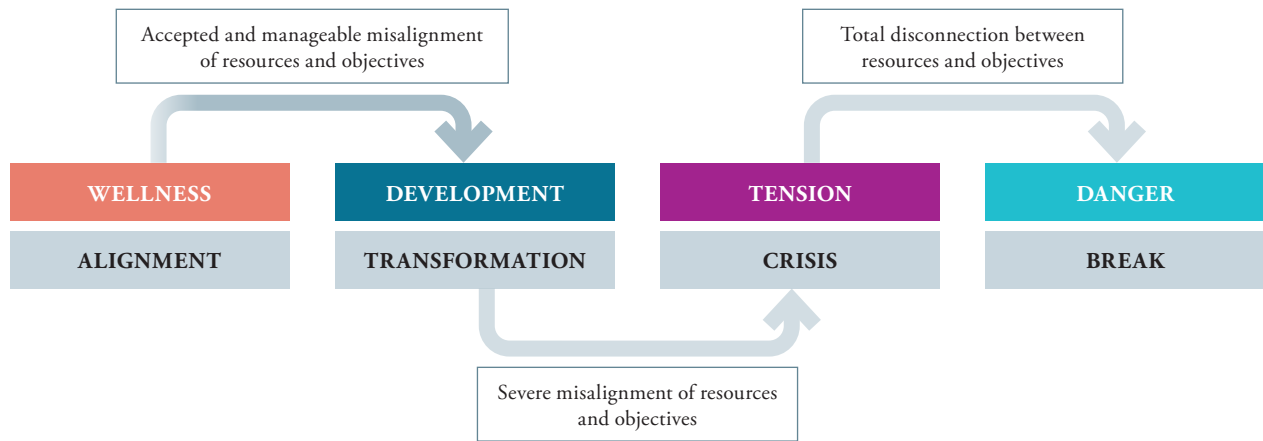
For example, crossing the attract of illiteracy throws us into the world of reading. It is now impossible to look at a text in the alphabet we have learnt without reading it. The boundary is irreversibly crossed (unless there is a brain injury that disrupts or obliterates what has been learned).

In the same way, once I know how to walk, every time I stand up and decide to move forward, I walk. This learning is definitive. The line between not being able to walk and being able to walk has been crossed. Of course, remember that in this example, our ability to walk is a function of our state of health and is therefore likely to evolve, not to say will certainly evolve.

Depending on the nature of the limits and the conditions under which they are crossed, this overstepping may remain ecological for the individual (they grow, evolve, etc.), the group to which they belong, the group itself or, more broadly, society:

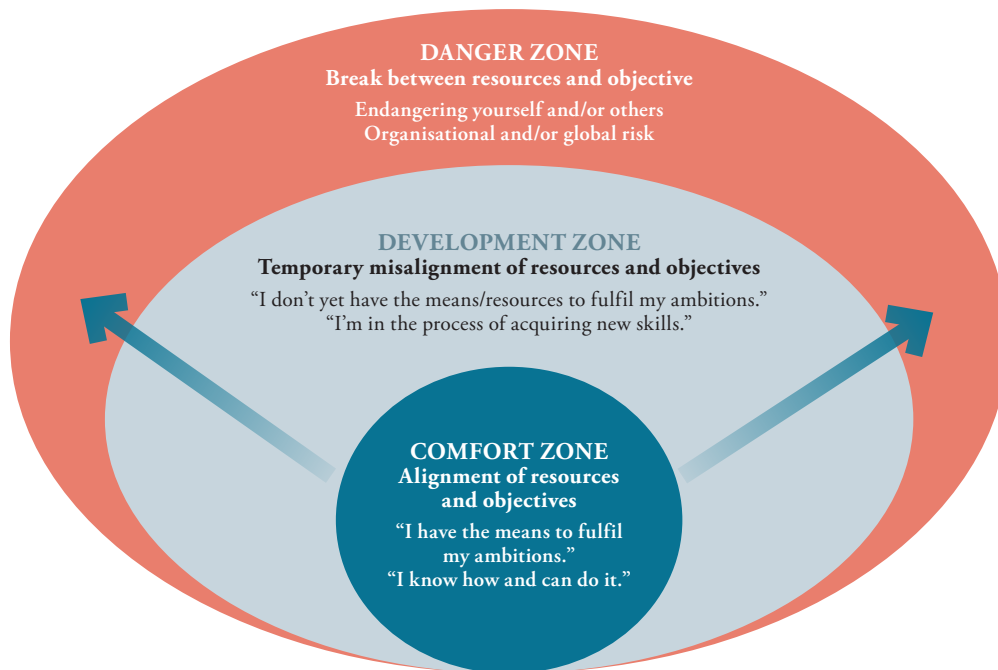
- Either because the crossing was gradual: it can be understood as a series of crossings, the sum of which is large but the unit of which is “reasonable”.
- Or (which amounts to the same thing) because the nature, extent or timing of the change has remained compatible, at all times, with the individual’s, team’s or organisation’s capacity to adapt and evolve.

Certain excesses, in their repetition, may contain an element of danger, like an untreated illness that becomes chronic or the example of the frog that dies from scalding if the temperature of the water in which it is immersed gradually increases. For a time, adaptation is possible, until a certain point when it becomes impossible.



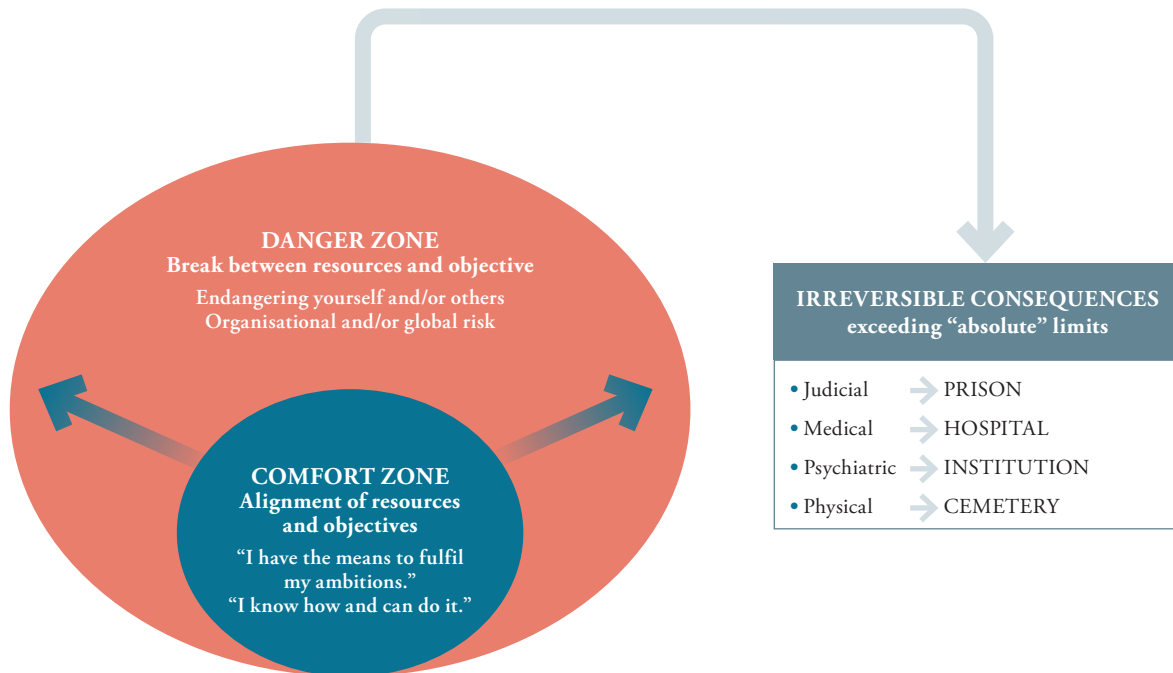
Finally, some exceeded limits are not environmentally friendly because of (i) their speed of execution, completion and/or implementation, (ii) their nature or (iii) their scale or intensity.

We then move directly from a comfort zone to a danger zone where means, resources and skills are disconnected from the objective or goal.



The sudden crossing of these limits throws us directly from our comfort zone/development zone into a zone where our being is at risk, from a psychological, physical or social point of view. The limits are irretrievably exceeded. Paradoxically, we could say that a "real" limit is one that, once exceeded, there is no going back from.

Sudden or excessive overstepping of certain limits – either in terms of time or level/quality – can result in being thrown into a danger zone with a potentially fatal outcome.



There are also levels that signify the crossing of limits, which may be

- continuous and progressive, capable of being metabolised harmoniously by the system (be it an individual, a team or a company);
- discontinuous but nonetheless adaptive, capable of being supported under certain material, physical or psychological conditions that are more demanding and progressive;
- disruptive and likely to cause the system to enter a zone of turbulence and tension which, if it widens or lasts, is likely to lead to exhaustion (mental and physical, financial and ecological resources, etc.) and, ultimately, inaction;
- a dangerous situation that poses a lasting or irreversible threat to the long-term survival of the system, from a physical, economic or psychological point of view.

It is therefore a question of distinguishing between limits that can be pushed back, under certain conditions (pace, amplitude, nature, etc.) and limits that cannot be crossed, on pain of lethal endangerment, whether in terms of legal, psychological, physical or social consequences.

The risk of generalisation and availability heuristics

The tendency to generalise and the availability bias are significant risks, in addition to the danger they may lead to.

The generalisation here would be to consider that what has been possible in a given context, for a given person or group of people, is reproducible in another context and can be applied to everyone (as in the cartoon above).

For example, the tendency to consider that any new record – obtained in a particular context and perhaps difficult to reproduce – becomes the new standard against which all performance should henceforth be measured and assessed would constitute a risk of generalisation.

While it is easy to understand the relevance of this kind of logic in certain contexts, such as sports competitions, it is perhaps worth remembering that such an approach can easily compromise performance by putting an organisation and its players under strain. The balance of the system, the health of individuals and the sustainability of society are threatened.

By way of example, we can cite the exceptional performance achieved by major industrial groups thanks to an extraordinarily favourable geopolitical context. If the context changes, as it inevitably will, is it reasonable to expect the organisation to break a new record and to set an exceptional past performance as the benchmark for future performance? As the saying goes, it's a question of knowing "how far to go too far"!

Availability bias, also known as availability heuristic, refers to the tendency or mode of reasoning of people who, on a given question, favour and overestimate the information immediately available to their memory, particularly when it is stereotyped. Immediately available information is thus favoured to the detriment of broader, more recent and different information that is better able to describe or affect reflection and analysis and enable a better-informed decision to be made.

Judgement, which by definition is never totally objective, can therefore be influenced by

- newly acquired information on a past event, which is more available than older information or information relating to a distinct scenario with no direct causal link to the event (retrospective bias);
- information linked to situations frequently encountered in the past, which are more easily represented mentally (conservatism);
- redundant information, repeated either by different sources or by the same source but frequently, which acquires a mental presence more markedly or more easily (for example, the rumour phenomenon).

Judgement can be greatly impaired by a biased perception of the facts and by their interpretation, rational choices can be negatively influenced and decision-making distorted.

An indirect illustration of such availability bias would be to trivialise a feat achieved by a few and widely talked about. The event loses its exceptional or singular character and becomes commonplace. It can therefore serve as a target for the greatest number of people, who are expected to live up to a feat that is no longer named as such. The standard – unrealistic to achieve – becomes persecutory for those who agree to refer to it.

Surpassing yourself and efficiency

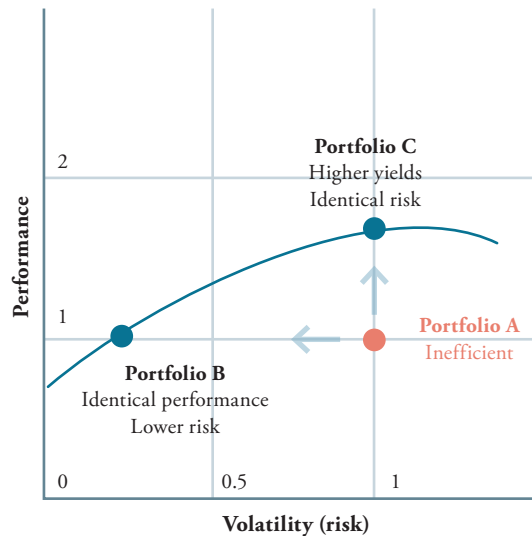
Perhaps an original way of approaching the notion of surpassing yourself is to take diversion into modern portfolio theory.

According to this theory, the "efficient frontier" is the curve that represents all portfolios where, at a given level of expected risk, there is no other combination of assets that has a higher expected return.

A portfolio of assets (equities, bonds, etc.) is said to be efficient when either of these two conditions is met:

- for a given (or desired) level of expected return, there is no other portfolio with less risk; or
- for a given (or accepted) level of risk, there is no other portfolio offering a better expected return.

Graphically, this can be represented by a curve like the one below:



In practical terms, what we're looking for is

- to maximise return or;
 - to minimise risk;
- while agreeing to adapt one to the other.

In one case, it means accepting a higher level of risk in order to optimise performance. In the other, it means accepting a lower level of return in order to bear the maximum level of risk you are prepared to take.

It is therefore the combination of these two variables that we are seeking to optimise, in the knowledge that there is no such thing as a risk-free return and that the search for a return on investment is an essential part of our strategy.

- high performance means accepting a high level of risk;
- a low level of risk means accepting a moderate level of performance.

More generally, the concept of efficiency can be defined as the relationship between the resources saved and the degree to which the objectives are achieved.

A facility whose effectiveness has been demonstrated is considered efficient if it is possible for it to meet one or other of the following conditions:

- Increasing the degree to which objectives are achieved without increasing the resources allocated to achieving them.
- Reduce the resources allocated to operations without reducing the extent to which the objectives are achieved.

Is it possible to transpose this reasoning to self-improvement? In other words, could we conceive of a reasonable or reasoned approach to surpassing ourselves, within a logic of excellence and controlled growth capable of satisfying ambitious objectives while preserving long-term well-being and sustainability?

We will come back to this point in Part II, which explores the creation of the conditions for surpassing yourself, and maintaining and deploying it.



SURPASSING YOURSELF CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EMERGENCE, MAINTENANCE AND DEPLOYMENT

*“To be number one, you must train
like you’re number two.”*

MAURICE GREENE

*“Talent hits a target no one else can hit; genius hits a target
no one else can see.”*

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

ALTRAD VALUES

By defining and choosing values that it undertakes to embody and defend, a group signifies the responsibility that each of its members undertakes towards themselves and others.

It also lays the foundations for our emotional relationship with the other, for the heart-to-heart or soul-to-soul bond we forge, and for our spiritual relationship with Humanity and the World.

Finally, it traces a path of elevation that allows it, occasionally and momentarily, to silence or better direct the more animal instincts that govern it and to express nobler aspirations that create the conditions of security and peace that are indispensable to the development of community and life.

The more a group grows and evolves, the greater the need to define, clarify and communicate its core values. In this way, a company can rally around values that underpin and drive it.

The Altrad Group has grown considerably in recent years. Its growth is expressed not only in terms of (i) the creation of financial, economic and societal value, (ii) the number of companies that make up the Altrad network, and (iii) the number of employees, but also in geographical and cultural terms, as Altrad is established on almost every continent.

We are firmly convinced that endowing ourselves with values and embodying them is not just an aesthetic or communications proposition. It is a fundamentally strategic, cultural and relational proposition. It is a professional and managerial decision.

As has been said during previous seminars:

- A company's values shape its organisational culture:
 - As an integral part of (i) the vision and (ii) the culture (the set of practices, processes and interactions that shape the environment and are in turn influenced by it) of an organisation, values are the linchpins that guide decision-making and draw the line between what is important and what is not, between what is right and what is not.
- Culture underpins strategy:
 - Culture underpinning strategy can work as a significant resource and a potential hindrance for a company.
 - While culture has many aspects and manifestations, at its heart is a certain sense of purpose and shared values that guide decision-making within the company.
 - These values shape the company's culture and define its DNA.
- The culture of remarkable companies is based on a core set of values, key components of strategic planning:
 - Corporate values are the principles that guide the organisation's culture, as well as the priorities and actions of its members.
 - Increasingly, they are becoming fundamental components of strategic planning in that they guide and drive the intention, momentum and direction of the organisation's leadership.
 - From this point of view, the choice of clear, realistic, original and specific values (embodying the organisation) can be particularly useful.
- Implementing a culture assessment system to validate the relevance of the values chosen in relation to what is actually happening in the company:
 - Knowledge: do employees have a thorough and accurate understanding of the values and can they apply them to their day-to-day behaviour and observe them in their colleagues?
 - Perception: is there a discrepancy between the declared values and those actually lived within the company?
 - Behaviour: assess the number of situations where behaviours and decisions are in line with values, or are not.
 - Process: assessing policies, practices and work processes.
 - Results: rewards and recognition for the people who embody, represent, promote and bring values to life on a daily basis.
- Values accompany change while supporting the more permanent aspects of a company's organisation.
- Values are non-negotiable:
 - Jointly defined and/or adopted, the values seal a commitment, with things strongly aligned with them. To depart from them is to weaken their purpose and objective, and to deprive them of meaning. Failure to respect our values can potentially weaken the Group and threaten its survival.

- Values must be lived and embodied.

Aligning the six logical levels of the vision – from vocation to action plan (as a reminder, the six logical levels of the vision on which we previously worked are: vocation, ambition, values, management principles, strategic decisions and action plan) – with a view to coherence presupposes that the values are transformed, translated into management principles, that is, that they are actually implemented and do not remain mere declarations of intent. Actions often speak louder and better than words.

As you know, the Altrad Group has already defined its values, which are set out in its organisational charter:

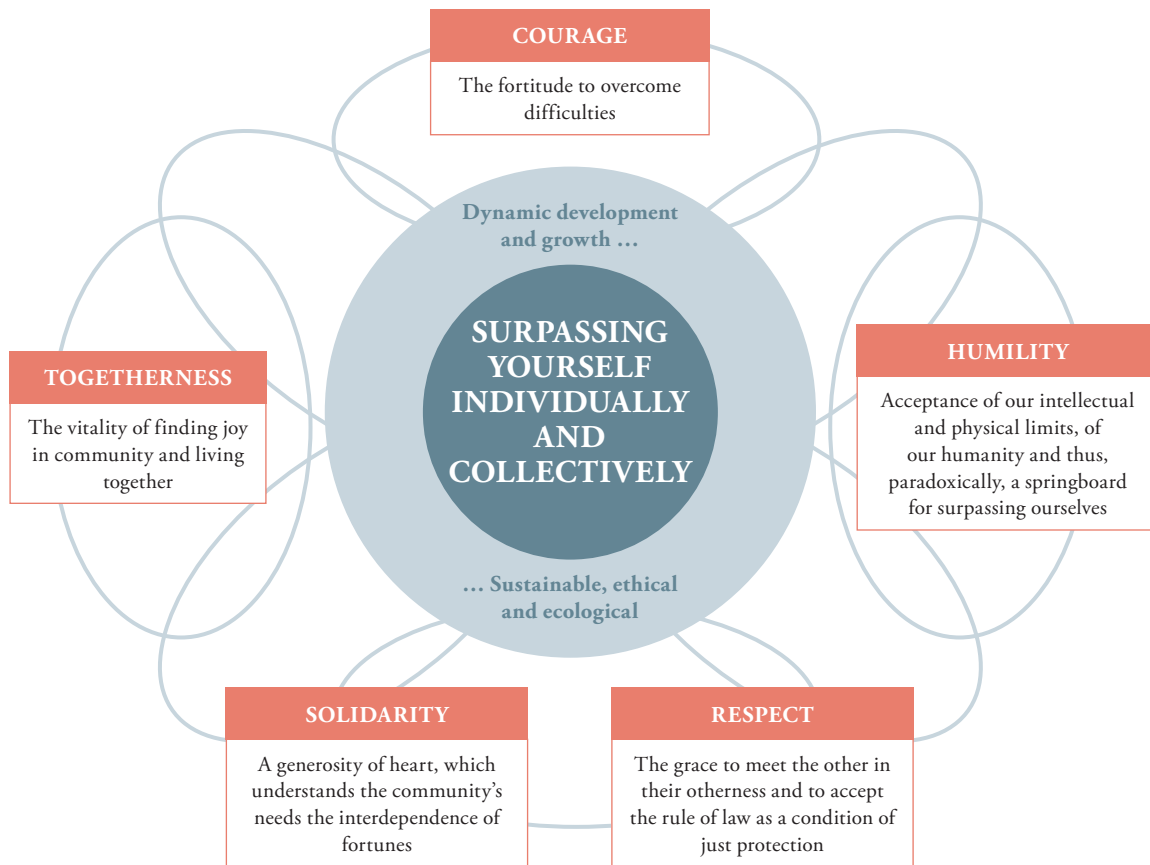
- Integrity and loyalty.
- Honesty and mutual trust.
- Freedom and passion.
- Valuing cultural differences.
- Humanism.
- Cohesion and team spirit.
- A culture of change.
- A strong vision of the future.

From the outset, the Altrad Group has made a commitment to people, their strengths, weaknesses, passions, doubts, experiences, diversity, generosity and empathy.

Although we have chosen five main values, there are many others that underpin our actions: sometimes perceived as harsh, subject to the demands of competition, the business world can also choose to embody a more respectful attitude towards people. This is the challenge that the Altrad Group strives to meet on a daily basis, with five values as its rudder and compass: lofty, ambitious and demanding, but also benevolent and generous.

Respect, solidarity, courage, conviviality and humility are values that are both distinct and linked, in that they can be expressed independently of each other, but in their joint realisation they reach a level of meaning and a sense of completion that is almost holistic.

They support our actions, our growth and our progress, as much as they surround and secure them, in a continuous and ongoing movement of reciprocity: our values guide us, invite us to surpass ourselves and at the same time frame our practices so that our development remains sustainable and ecological for everyone individually and collectively.



Together

The vitality of finding joy in community and living together.

“Every day, we try to create a working environment that reflects the spirit of our teams, based on commitment and open-mindedness. We share and collaborate in a spirit of togetherness. We also celebrate our successes and combine operational excellence with cross-functional teamwork, enabling us to produce ideas and results of the highest quality.”

In 2020–2021, curing the Covid-19 crisis, confinement and social distancing undermined conviviality. If it's no longer possible to get together, celebrate, have fun, embrace, work and be physically together, how can we maintain friendly relations? How can we protect social interaction when fear creeps in and our exchanges are conducted electronically?

Against a backdrop of competition and market tension, how can we preserve a place where people can help each other and enjoy each other's company, where conviviality continues to be nurtured?

Because the aim of conviviality is to help people live together better and to (re)personalise human relations, it is a key value in the service of the quality and peace of our exchanges. Investing in the social bond and avoiding one-sidedness in encounters are far from insignificant intentions. Today, perhaps even more than in the past, we believe it is vital to create the conditions for friendly exchanges, meetings and dialogue.

User-friendliness at the service of humanisation

In a seminal essay published in New York in 1973, the author and philosopher Ivan Illich developed a moral critique of industrial society. Highlighting the self-destructive nature of Western societies, their meaningless evolution, the finality of a capitalism that finds its justification only in itself, enslaving human beings more than it develops them, he sketched out other paths, such as establishing a society of joyful, convivial austerity to replace an industrial society in deep crisis, carrying the threat of a “technocratic disaster”. In his view, it is only by rediscovering a space for living well – or conviviality – that societies will become more human. “The alternative to the alienation of human beings by industrial society is a convivial society that gives people the opportunity to express their creativity through action, using tools that reflect their own values.”⁶

The more aggressive an activity is perceived to be and the more likely it is to undermine cordiality, the more compelling the need for conviviality becomes, in that it enables friendly relations to be maintained, avoids the escalation to violence, and preserves the notion of pleasure, the guarantor of constantly renewed motivation.

User-friendliness for pleasure, and thus for motivation

For many of us, the pleasure we derive from doing what we do is largely conditioned by who we do it with. This is a recognition of the importance of social ties and the quality of the relationships we build with others, but also the notion of pleasure.

Human beings are social beings, whose survival depends on (i) attachment, a primary emotion present in all higher mammals and which in humans evolves into love, thanks to which they are nourished and protected by their parents (or any other parental figure capable of performing these *maternal* and *paternal* functions) and (ii) their ability to integrate and be accepted within a group.

Its intrinsic motivation is conditional on obtaining a biological pleasure – or reward – that gives it sufficient energy to move to action and the ability to renew that same energy, a bit like the dynamo on a bicycle that recharges as it advances.

By maintaining friendly and loving relationships, people nourish their hearts and their souls. By infusing pleasure and joy into their lives, they fuel their internal motor, the one that sets them in motion. And in so doing, they work to improve their health.

Does this mean that conflict must be avoided at all costs (if at all possible)? No. Rather, it’s an invitation to choose conviviality as a state of mind and a disposition of heart to overcome (unavoidable) differences and help our humanity to gradually emancipate itself from the games of power and territory to embark on a path of greater spirituality.

Courage**The fortitude to overcome difficulties.**

“We are keen to go beyond limits and boundaries. We want to explore innovative ways of thinking and doing things.

As a result, what we do is not easy: we are entrepreneurs, we take risks and we constantly question ourselves.

Our aim is to always achieve the best result despite the difficulties.”

In the period of great uncertainty that we have been living through for several years, when many fears are coming to the fore, when the present seems threatening and the future in danger, when the challenges to which we are exposed seem to be multiplying (health, geopolitical, human, technological, labour, competition challenges, etc.), how can we resist the temptation to flee or give up?

How can we escape the shock and loss? How can I count on others when they can be dangerous?

Daring to set yourself in motion, persevering, overcoming your fears: that is courage.

Courage: a cardinal virtue

The myths and tales of our childhoods, whatever our cultural origins, have steeped us in courage, nourished us with the magnificence of the hero, who stands firm when the weak weaken, forces destiny, accomplishes feats, draws from themselves the sometimes unsuspected moral or physical strength, braving real dangers and inner monsters. Raised to the rank of cardinal virtue, it makes all other virtues possible, and is a condition for their realisation.

Courage: the art of starting again and again

Any life experience that puts an individual or a group in a position to confront their fears and doubts, to test their resistance and their ability to sustain prolonged physical effort, to overcome the pressure to which the prospect of victory or defeat exposes them, to get back up and carry on without giving in to the temptation to give up, mobilises that particular strength that is courage.

Knowing how to begin is the courageous act. For Vladimir Jankélévitch, “the courageous are those who have the art of beginning”. The inaugural threshold of decision-making is the hallmark of courage. Does the existence of courage precede its essence? You have to decide. You have to want it. In this sense, courage is a consequence of wanting. Courage is already wanting, simply deciding to want.

Knowing how to start again is an act of courage. “What is done remains to be done, and I must do it immediately”, writes Jankélévitch. Courage cannot be capitalised on. Just because I was courageous yesterday doesn’t mean I’ll be courageous tomorrow, in the face of other challenges. The ethics of courage: courage is without victory. It is without victory, but it is a victory over your own self; it is a victory over the permanent and constantly renewed invitation to give up. Discouragement will not get the last word in this sequence of events.

Courage: victory over oneself

It is a victory over ourselves: (I) over fear, (II) over the temptation to give up and (III) over inertia.

Courage and business: managerial courage

Although unique in its structure and organisation, a company is part of the wider world system. Like the latter, it is subject to crises, unpredictability, uncertainty and dangers, both internal and external, that threaten its survival, development and equilibrium.

Whether they are financial, economic, technical, health related or human in nature, these threats require individual and collective fortitude, which is never more needed than when the danger is close at hand.

As philosopher Michel Lacroix observes, courage is the result of a struggle between that part of us which fears being hurt or displeased, seeks comfort and runs away from difficulty, and that part which stands firm, dares to say no and faces up to reality. Clearly, this is not the prerogative of leaders and managers. It is a matter for everyone: we are all

exposed to our own reality and difficulties. Whatever your position in the organisation, you can mobilise it by activating a few levers:⁷

The ethical stance:

- self-awareness;
- internal resources;
- fair self-assessment.

In 2006 Peter Drucker,⁸ arguing that there is no such thing as a typical profile of a good manager or a great leader, as might found on a list of predefined qualities and skills, emphasised that one of the fundamental qualities that a leader must possess is courage.

To lead is to decide. Courage in decision-making contains all forms of courage: it is the “inaugural threshold of decision-making”. Managerial courage lies primarily in the willingness and ability of a leader or manager to accept the consequences of their decisions, choices, arbitrations, actions or inactions. It presupposes lucidity and discernment upstream, but also, over time, a sense of responsibility.

Courage can fluctuate. It is unstable, sometimes it is present, sometimes it is not. The courage of one person can be enough to instil courage in others, to combat the phases of its natural erosion. To encourage means to give energy, fortitude to someone and especially to stimulate them to do something specific by an act or a word. Admittedly, this is not the prerogative of managers and directors, but it is undoubtedly among the skills that can be used to mobilise teams.

The challenge is to develop three forms of courage:

- mental courage, the courage of the head, at the origin of decisions, which makes it possible to formulate intentions and take the decision to act;
- emotional courage, the courage of the heart, which enables us to overcome our fears, obstacles and limitations;
- physical courage, the courage of the body, which enables decisions to be put into practice (know-how, action, behaviour, commitment, energy).

How can the organisation help? By creating the conditions for the expression of courage, so that it does not remain confined to rare (and strong) personalities, but can spread throughout the company, by developing a culture of courage.

Humility

Acceptance of our intellectual and physical limits, of our humanity and, paradoxically, a springboard for surpassing ourselves.

“We are open to all points of view and are convinced that we can learn from anyone, anywhere. We always act and conduct our business in a spirit of inclusion. In the same way, we learn from both our mistakes and our successes, and above all, we never underestimate our competitors. For each project, we seek to establish transparent feedback so that we can achieve our objectives and continually improve.”

“People press toward the light not in order to see better but in order to shine better.”

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Every crisis, every difficult situation brings us face to face with our vulnerability, our finitude, our mortality. It’s a lesson in humility in the face of the strength and complexity of living things, and paradoxically their fragility, a call to find ways of living together intelligently.

There is a certain martial tone in managerial discourse, which views commercial relations as

a battlefield where only the strongest, the most seasoned, the most cunning, the fastest, the most ingenious, the most deceitful will (sometimes) succeed and win over the weakest. And if we win, how will we feel? Will it fuel our sense of omnipotence, or will we retain a dose of humility?

So we learn – sometimes from childhood – to fortify ourselves, to armour and steel ourselves, to emphasise our strengths and hide our weaknesses. Of course we need to acquire skills and knowledge, to learn to desensitise ourselves partially and reasonably so that we don't expose ourselves, with an open heart, to every wound. But this movement, engendered by a perception of the world as purely combative, creates a truncated vision of who we are, giving the illusion that we are invincible, impervious to blows, resistant to all adversity, unsinkable.

The reality is often quite different: in the course of our lives, we all experience times when we need support or help. What's more, it's not possible for a group of species to live in an interdependent world without helping each other.

This presupposes that we agree to share and expose our strength as well as our vulnerabilities, that we transcend our individual interests and adopt a collective strategy.

This is an invitation to recognise (i) the limits of our personal influence, our intelligence and our individual resources, and (ii) the need to pool our resources.

Humility is:

- An invitation to give up on individual victory and the satisfaction of personal interests alone. It encourages us to rethink our belief in the supremacy of the personal solution and to look to the collective strategy for the victorious outcome. It is a proposal for satisfying the legitimate need for personal glory, even via collective success.
- The belief that commitment to the success of all does not separate me from individual success and the personal satisfaction (egotistical, in the non-judgemental sense of ego) that it brings.
- A state of being that allows the enthusiastic celebration of success (technological, financial, human, etc.) without considering the value of the competitor.
- An attitude that allows us to (i) question ourselves, our methods, our choices and decisions, and therefore progress, (ii) recognise our share of responsibility in the making and/or maintenance of a problem with which we are confronted; by taking responsibility, we open the way to a solution, (iii) and finally, to accept defeat, our own individual or collective limits, without self-deprecation, in the face of the recognised and applauded talent of our competitors, other team members, other subsidiaries and so on.
- A position that is more “solution” than “problem” oriented, in that it encourages people to take responsibility for their part in the making and/or maintenance of the problem (technical, financial, relational, etc.)
- an effective and relevant management technique to help individuals and teams grow.

By showing humility, we accept learning as a movement towards self-elevation. We recognise that the path of knowledge always remains open before us and choose to travel it with both modesty and grandeur, only to discover, paradoxically, that the journey leads to greater humility and value.

Respect

The grace to meet the other in their otherness and to accept the rule of law as a condition of just protection.

“We accept our responsibilities, both as a group and as individuals, to prevent situations that would jeopardise the health and safety of everyone in the workplace. We treat people with consideration, regardless of their position. We conduct our business in accordance with exemplary standards of transparency, integrity and honesty. Our responsibility to all our employees and our working environment is particularly important to us.”

The invaluable thing about any crisis is that it gives us the opportunity to sort out what’s essential, what’s important and what is secondary. In other words, it invites us to distinguish between what we want to preserve and respect, and what no longer deserves our attention or loyalty.

Respect, in a way, is an indicator of the value of *whom* or *what* we choose to respect. Not servile respect or respect imbued with propriety, but rather a deliberate, chosen, conscious and determined respect.

In a context of transformation and uncertainty, we are encouraged to rethink (i) our relationship with ourselves, with others and with the world, (ii) the validity of our commitments in the light of new conditions that make them either more relevant than ever or, on the contrary, anachronistic or obsolete, and (iii) to finally decide what we choose to respect.

Fundamentally, our *raison d’être* is very much in the general interest, which means respect for all our stakeholders, society and the planet.

Respect: a simple concept with a complex application

The right to respect is one of the demands, if not the strongest, that individuals make. To be respected. Which of us, which organisation, government or institution has never asked, or even demanded, that their desire, values, beliefs, ideas, rules, property, body, freedom, honour, territory, etc. be respected? From the suburbs to affluent neighbourhoods, from the playground to the workplace, the demand for respect is ubiquitous.

The notion of respect, which seems so obvious (“Talk to me about respect, I know what it means, ask me to explain it, I don’t know any more”) is nevertheless somewhat complex to define, more in its scope than in its substance.

Indeed, respect is generally understood as the consideration we give to a person and what defines them, but also the care we give to things. Because we value people and possessions, ideas and rules and their meaning, we respect them.

What complicates its understanding is not so much this definition as the way it is applied.

This is due to two major issues relating to :

- Value: is everything respectable? And if so, equally? In similar proportions? By its very nature, value is subjective and determines the level of respect we are prepared to pay.
- Loyalty: can we respect everything at the same time, permanently or definitively? How can we resolve the intrinsic conflict that arises when, by respecting one thing, one idea, one person, one concept, I can at the same time harm another thing, another idea, another person, another concept? How can self-respect and respect for others be made compatible when our interests diverge? This raises the question of the hierarchy we are sometimes forced to accept, and consequently the question of loyalty and choice.

Examples of potential conflicts abound:

- If I respect life, and therefore my own and that of others, and my life is threatened by someone who attacks me, by legitimately defending myself at the risk of taking my attacker's life, I am undermining the principle that guides my actions, namely respect for life. Can I be loyal to my own values, to myself and to the other person at the same time, and respect everyone equally?
- If I make a commitment to do something for someone in a given context, but the context changes, can I review the terms of my commitment (and therefore no longer honour it) or do I have to abide by the terms of the agreement that has become obsolete in the name of honouring my initial commitment?

Respect for human beings

Humanist thought, which places the development of the essential qualities of the human being at the forefront of its concerns, and by extension places the human being at their centre, has helped to reinforce the notion of respect. Because human beings have an intrinsic value, they are worthy of respect. "By the simple fact that I exist and embody life, I am entitled to respect."

As Matthieu Ricard points out in his blog (25 August 2014), respect is understood as (i) giving full importance to the value of the other, (ii) respecting difference, and (iii) respecting the other by rejoicing in their happiness and achievements. Lack of respect for others can lead to the worst atrocities. Sadly history is full of examples of this.

Respect for material goods

The notion of respect extends to the care of manufactured objects, but also to the natural elements (mineral and energy resources, water, air, etc.). This is clearly the place for environmental responsibility.

It can be considered as part of a debate on private property – individual or collective – but also on the notion of the commons (air, water, land, etc.).⁹

Respect for abstract concepts

The notion of respect extends beyond the living and the tangible. We also speak of respect when we refer to respect for rules, laws, values, hierarchies, commitments, opinions, traditions, etc.

One of the main difficulties lies in the hierarchy that each of these concepts establishes.

In some cultures (or at other times), the notion of honour is superior to that of life. A person who is judged to have dishonoured their clan or family may be deprived of their life.

In other cultures, such as democratic states, the notion of freedom (individual and collective) is fundamental. Nevertheless, it is limited in its application by the freedom of others ("One person's freedom ends where another's begins").

Does the notion of respect presuppose, by construction, free adherence on the part of the subject? Is it possible to speak of respect when a person is led to act according to the prescriptions made to them under the effect of submission (physical, moral, emotional, affective force, etc.) or because of constraint (state, legal and judicial, social, family, etc.), and not because of their freely consented and chosen adherence to what is the object of respect?

Respect for our rules and values

The more an organisation grows, the more it diversifies and, paradoxically, the more fragile it becomes. One of the risks we run is that our rules, principles and values may be diluted when the concepts that initially defined our culture are augmented and enriched, but also challenged by new ways of doing things, new habits and new operating methods.

How can we preserve what makes up our vital identity, our DNA, while allowing the natural evolution to which all living systems are subject?

It is undoubtedly essential that we agree on a set of shared values, to which we all choose to adhere and which we undertake to honour and respect, in the firm belief that this is the price we have to pay to ensure our long-term survival as a group.

All rules and values, no matter how just, are nonetheless liable to be threatened by individual or collective, isolated or generalised behaviour that undermines them temporarily or permanently. How can we create the conditions for respecting the pact we are creating with the Altrad Group, mutually and reciprocally?

How can we create the conditions for respect? Should we talk about educating people to respect? Respect cannot be decreed, any more than trust or love. How can we protect what we value? What limits do we draw to govern our collective functioning? What internal sanctions do we equip ourselves with in a social context where – as a Group and as individuals working within it – we are subject to rules and laws from which we are not allowed to deviate?

At most, it is possible to create a favourable context. It is dynamic and can only be conceived of as reciprocal, in the same way as trust and love.

Solidarity

A generosity of heart, which understands the community's needs the interdependence of fortunes.

“Solidarity here means teamwork, reliability and trust. We collaborate and contribute to the various projects we undertake together, sharing ideas and opportunities, knowledge and resources. We support and defend each other. We always favour open and participative relations and put the general interest before particular interests.”

In a complex world, where the fate of each individual and each nation is intimately linked to that of others, where the future of the planet (climatic, environmental and geopolitical threats, new challenges that disrupt existing balances, etc.) depends on the coordination of efforts and the joint responsibility of all, is it still possible to free ourselves from the imperative of solidarity?

Solidarity as a response to chaos? From competition to generosity

The concept of solidarity, which is polysemic and evolving, has a very broad meaning: a notion of mutual aid, assistance, out of necessity, herd spirit or moral sentiment, it originates and/or results in mutual dependence between human beings or groups of human beings who, at one level or another, need each other and have a mutual, sometimes reciprocal, responsibility towards each other. This community of interests does not necessarily imply altruism, as is the case with animals.

Solidarity thus unfolds along a long continuum: on the one hand, forced, redistributive solidarity, which is more political and ideological in origin, that is, the organised obligation to give up the exclusively personal use of one's own resources (time, money, knowledge, etc.) for the benefit of a wider, less well-endowed community whose interests

one shares (in whole or in part) and (ii) on the other, voluntary solidarity, that is, the quasi-spiritual value of mutual assistance in the name of the indefectible bond that unites living beings and which, moreover, contributes to mutual enrichment.

Thinking about solidarity means considering the idea of internal cohesion or reciprocal dependence. Logically, this reciprocal dependence should concern not only the advantages but also what might be perceived as the disadvantages of solidarity. In other words, if I benefit from the positive aspects of solidarity (redistribution, sharing, mutual aid, etc.), am I prepared to assume the risks and responsibilities (debts, reciprocal co-obligation, etc.)? Or does my status, my situation of “weakness” (economic, intellectual, physical, etc.) exempt me? What are the possible beneficial, negative or even perverse effects of the definition we give to solidarity?

Organised solidarity, civic virtue?

While morality advocates generosity, politics advocates solidarity, which can be considered a civic virtue insofar as we try to develop converging interests within society: solidarity implies acting for the benefit of people whose interests we share.

Does this mean that the whole prevails over the singular, that the interests of the collective outweigh those of the individuals who make it up, taken separately? Do human beings instinctively show solidarity, or is solidarity the result of learned or even forced behaviour?

In a market economy, the wealth produced is distributed between various agents. This primary distribution (profits, salaries, etc.) may be supplemented, particularly in countries with a welfare system, by a redistribution logic designed to help individuals excluded from the productive effort and therefore from its fruits.

Solidarity organised by states is no longer superimposed on voluntary reciprocity. It is objectively effective. It invites us to be selfish together and intelligently. What’s more, it provides a form of socialisation and regulation for everyone. Solidarity is therefore both politically and economically useful.

Is there not a risk that generosity as an incentive, seen as a moral virtue, will create a world of dependency?

The system of forced solidarity is not without its critics, in that it is said to have perverse effects, including the disempowerment of the beneficiaries of solidarity and the draining of the generosity of forced contributors:

“Compulsory solidarity, as a coercive measure, is a moral regression, because it seeks to include in the law acts that belong to morality. It replaces the feeling of solidarity with two other feelings: that of dispossession for those who wish to profit from the good of others; that of revolt and dissimulation for those who are threatened with dispossession.”¹⁰

Does compulsory solidarity contribute to the emergence of a fairer, more equitable world? For some, by breaking the (fraternal) links between those who give (under the effect of a state obligation or a moral or social constraint) and those who receive, in favour of the creation of perpetual rights that replace one-off recognition.

It should be noted that from a psychological point of view, a debt can be created – with potentially pernicious effects – which creditors can “claim back” at any time, according to the terms and intensity of their choice. This brings us to the notion of gift that French sociologist Marcel Mauss addressed in his essay *The Gift* in which he demonstrates that there is no such thing as a free gift: every gift must be followed by a counter-gift,

according to precise pre-established codes. Gifts and counter-gifts are based on the triple obligation of giving, receiving and returning, creating a bond or state of dependence between giver and receiver that allows for the permanent re-creation of the social bond.

Voluntary solidarity and generosity

Unlike competition, solidarity nurtures relationships that assume a shared destiny and a willingness to seek solutions together and jointly adopt alternatives to the problems encountered, in a spirit of shared responsibility.

Generosity, on the other hand, is an act in favour of others whose interests we do not share. It is selfless and ethical insofar as it does not conceal an ulterior motive, which could be grouped together under the generic term of image philanthropy. This generosity certainly has its limits and is of relatively little objective use.

Solidarity is distinct from altruism, where people help their neighbours out of a simple moral commitment, without the need for reciprocity, and from cooperation, where everyone works in the general interest of the whole.

Human solidarity is a communal bond and an important social value that unites the destinies of all people. It is a humanistic approach that raises awareness of the fact that all people belong to the same community of interest.

Humanism, generosity, altruism and compassion are not equivalent terms, but they are frequently associated with the notion of solidarity, which is then understood as that disposition of heart and soul that honours our humanity. Because I am touched by the misfortune of others as if it were my own, I cannot look away and am inclined to help others.

Solidarity and business

“The company – and all the more so an industrial and service group like the Altrad Group, with its diversity and international dimension – gives an idea of what a human group is in the service of a common goal. While everyone needs to join the company and invest their strength and conviction in it, they also need to understand the rules of the game and its purpose. As one of the main principles of the Group’s management philosophy underlines in the Altrad charter of values, wealth is individual, organised by the collective’.¹¹

Once an activity takes on a collective dimension, can it do without the solidarity that ensures the pooling of resources, the pursuit of a shared objective and joint responsibility for risks and results?

If the whole is more than the sum of its parts, then within any organisation there is a “common thread” that is built collectively (albeit in different ways), for whose growth and sustainability everyone is responsible (to the extent of their investment), and whose resulting wealth is the property of everyone (according to a distribution mechanism that is understood and accepted).

A priori, there is a paradox in proclaiming solidarity in all areas heavily influenced by the spirit of competition.

How can an individual or specific performance be reconciled with solidarity? Is there any point in trying to bring together subjects (employees, companies, social categories, organisations, governments, peoples, etc.) whose objectives diverge, or are even diametrically opposed? And how can this be done? Is there any other way?

On a sporting field, is it possible for a team to be successful if each of its players ignores the common objective, the collective issues and goes it alone? Definitely not.

Without cooperation, no joint venture is possible. The more I understand that my success depends on the success of the people on whom I depend and who depend on me, the more my individual and collective interests require mutual support.

Cooperation is less a matter of agreement between different personalities than of the conviction that everyone's interests are linked and co-dependent. It is therefore a question of taking into account constraints and particular and specific objectives to make collective implementation possible.

However, there are situations in which it is less easy (i) to expose everyone to the consequences of their actions, as these effects will only become apparent over a long period of time, and (ii) to become aware of the interdependence of activities that are so far apart.

In these cases, as in perhaps all others, the ways of creating the conditions for effective and efficient cooperation include

- involving as many people as possible in the debate;
- encouraging recognition and acceptance of interdependence;
- accepting mistakes as an integral part of any process of creation and improvement, which is a succession of trials and adjustments (shifting away from the logic of accusation and guilt);
- creating an environment that encourages the kind of mutual support we are looking for
 - encouraging everyone to help and to ask for help (promoting a “solution” orientation),
 - by “penalising” the absence of such behaviour, or behaviour that explicitly hinders solidarity.

Solidarity and ethics

Since its creation, Altrad has never ceased to improve its practices in order to meet the ambitious objective of respecting the environment.

- the men and women who make Altrad a success (employees, customers, partners);
- its immediate environment and the society in which it operates;
- the balance of the ecosystem, biodiversity and the planet's resources.

Aware that there is still (and always will be) room for improvement, we have deliberately and explicitly given ourselves a *raison d'être* that commits us in terms of CSR.

Specifically, for several years now, our ambition – and we affirm and reaffirm this – has been to make Altrad an exemplary company in terms of:

- social responsibility;
- societal responsibility;
- environmental responsibility.

GLOBAL ETHICS

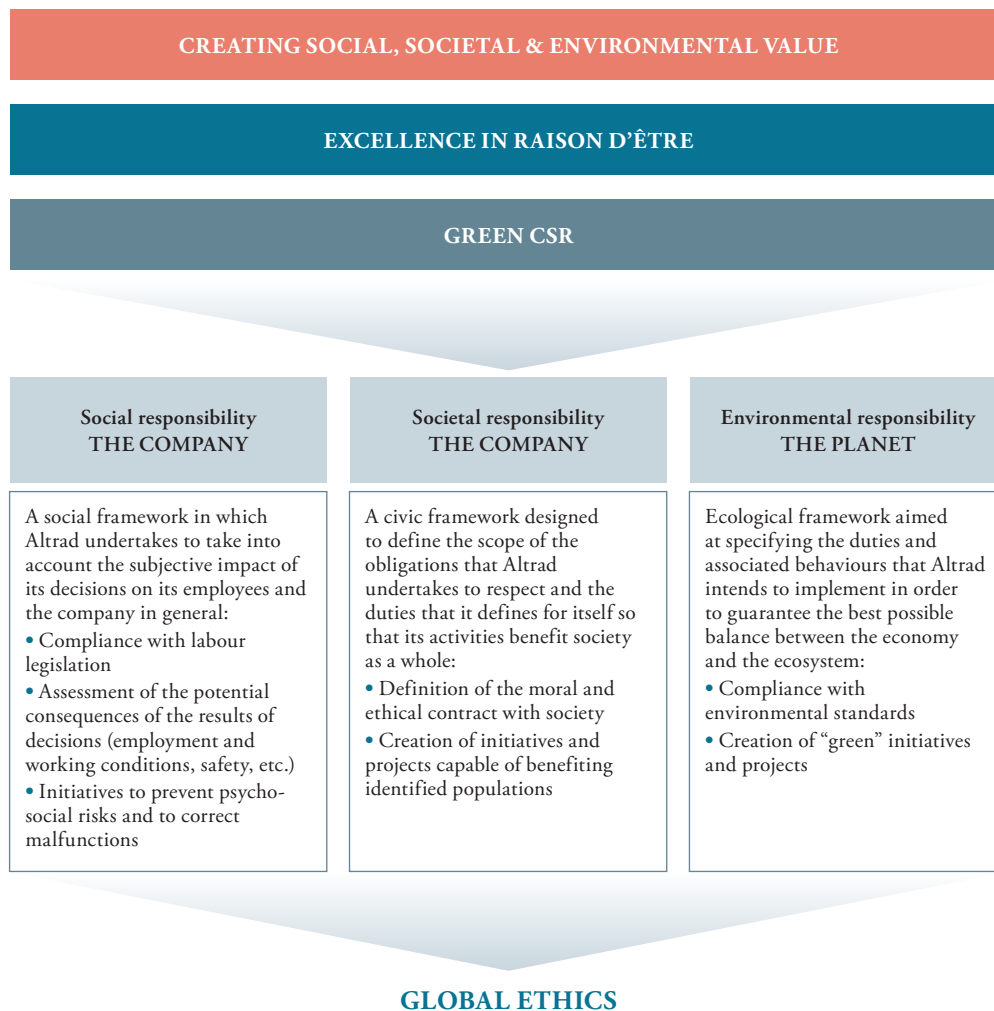
Creating the conditions for global ethics at all levels of the Group involves adopting and defending an ambitious CSR programme, which implies:

- promoting exemplary behaviour and conduct and developing a culture of compliance;
- careful respect for ethics and internal values;

- compliance with the law and competition law rules;
- preventing corruption and putting in place the means to combat and punish illegal acts;
- implementing a compliance programme and dedicated teams at all levels of the Group (training, best practices, etc.);
- implementing the highest level of security for installations, assets and systems, so as to offer our customers and employees a safe and reliable environment;
- a commitment to the community and society;
- encouraging an eco-responsible approach to sustainability that extends to all our products and services.

This can be summarised in three types of responsibility: social responsibility (the Altrad Group), societal responsibility (society) and environmental responsibility (the planet).

We intend to bring Altrad’s raison d’être to life on these three levels of responsibility.



Social responsibility

Health and safety

The Altrad Group operates in hazardous conditions, including some extremely difficult and demanding environments. One of our core values is to operate worldwide in a safe and responsible manner with the utmost respect for the health and safety of our employees, our subcontractors, our customers and the environment in which we work.

As well as our day-to-day commitment to everyone's safety, we recognise the commercial and financial importance of an outstanding health and safety culture.

What risks are we exposed to? How can they be mitigated, controlled or even eliminated? Do we need to review and adapt our risk matrix? For the record, it contains a wide range of risks, including organisational, human, structural and cyclical (political, economic, health, etc.):

- political and macroeconomic risks;
- customer concentration risk;
- information systems and cyber security risk;
- competition risk;
- raw materials risk;
- health, safety and environmental risks;
- exchange rate and interest rate risk;
- credit risk;
- cash flow risk;
- external growth risk;
- ethical risk.

These are all risks that need to be monitored, to which we should no doubt add reputational risk.

Integrity and ethics

Maintaining the highest level of integrity and professional ethics is the cornerstone of the Group's values and an essential condition for conducting business.

This integrity enables us to build honest and lasting relationships with customers, partners and other stakeholders, including shareholders and employees.

In addition, the majority of clients operate according to very strict ethical policies which the Group must respect. The Altrad Group operates throughout the world, including in certain countries where the risk of corruption is high. Although all countries have different laws, the Group and its clients operate on a global scale.

As a result, the Group has chosen to operate in accordance with the highest legal and ethical standards, particularly with regard to corruption and anti-competitive behaviour, often going beyond the legal requirements of the countries in which the activities are carried out.

Ethics, the art of directing conduct in a spirit of respect, is one of the conditions for trust, without which no quality relationship is possible.

In addition, as in any system whose components/actors are interdependent, the actions of those who violate our rules, values and laws are detrimental not only to their perpetrators, but also to the rest of the Group and potentially to other parties outside Altrad.

How can we continue to step up our efforts to ensure that as many people as possible are more committed to our values and the laws that govern our society?

The more we are aware of the law of interdependence that governs our human functioning, the more we understand that harm done to others is in fact harm done to ourselves, even if we seem to be able, momentarily, to free ourselves from the consequences of our actions.

Social responsibility

The (more or less acknowledged) divorce that some are denouncing between companies and society is undoubtedly rooted in the perception that companies, while trying to satisfy the interests of their shareholders and customers, have been slow to take into account the interests of employees and external stakeholders.

Does society benefit from the activities of companies? In many respects, it certainly does.

Nevertheless, the evolution of rights and mentalities is now leading to an unprecedented demand for co-responsibility: companies are no longer expected to see themselves, from the point of view of wealth creation and respect for their environment, as entities independent of the environment in which they work, and no longer to continue to develop to the detriment of their ecosystem.

A citizen relationship is emerging, and the role of companies is set to change substantially as a result.

For us, it is a question of envisaging what our contribution to society can be, wherever an Altrad Group company is established.

Environmental responsibility

By definition, the future can only be sustainable. Recycling, limiting our carbon footprint, reducing greenhouse gases, managing finite energies and resources, rational consumption, pollution control ... our global economic model puts the spotlight locally and increasingly globally on a circular economy that is responsible and respectful of the environment.

Awareness of our responsibility for the world we leave to our children and grandchildren, and to other living species, is now widely shared.

Our duty is to act accordingly and invent models, solutions, materials, products and services that respect the earth and the species that inhabit it. Let's make no mistake: the future will come at this price; the present already does.

SURPASSING YOURSELF, PERFORMANCE AND BUSINESS: ALTRAD'S PERFORMANCE IS BASED ON SURPASSING YOURSELF

Who is Altrad? What is the Altrad Group today? What defines us?

Altrad is a world leader in the provision of services to industry and the production of construction equipment. The Group offers high added value solutions, mainly in the oil and gas, energy, power generation, process, environment and construction sectors.

Historically, the Group has been a leading manufacturer of equipment for the construction and building markets.

We offer our customers – mainly major industrial contractors – a multidisciplinary range of services, from engineering and technical services to maintenance, access solutions and specialist services.

Established on almost every continent and with its head office based in France, the Group is enriched and strengthened by its 60,000 employees.

These few figures and historical facts are a reminder of just how vigorous Altrad’s organic and external growth has been. Dozens of companies with unique histories have been integrated into the Group, all of them renowned in their field of activity and the areas in which they operate. This integration has taken place while respecting their cultural and organisational differences, but also while inviting them to adhere to our founding values.

Over the years, particularly as a result of its external growth, Altrad’s culture has developed, enriched and consolidated, maintaining a strong foundation of humanist values – conviviality, courage, humility, respect and solidarity – which are themselves at the service of our professionalism, our commitment and our responsibility. Our economic performance, the development of our organisation and the professional fulfilment of our employees are all underpinned by these values, but are also driven by them. What’s more, as a company with a mission, we are committed to a CSR approach, demonstrating our attachment to the environment, society and the living world.

All these elements, all these figures, also say what we are all about: bringing to life an ambition, serving the greatest number of people, in a highly competitive and demanding industrial sector, while embodying and building on a strong culture, itself based on strong, inspiring values.

<p>A REASON TO EXIST</p> <p>Building a sustainable world that respects our employees, our customers, our ecosystem and all living things</p>	<p>A FOUNDER</p> <p>Mohed Altrad founded and has managed the Altrad Group since its creation in 1985. He is now Chairman and Chief Executive Officer</p>	<p>VALUES</p> <p>Five core values associated with strong principles of trust, commitment, excellence, integrity, loyalty and passion</p>
<p>AN AMBITION</p> <p>To serve our customers even better and help them make the most of their equipment over the long term with innovative industrial solutions</p>	<p>TALENTS</p> <p>A Group with a wealth of experience and some 60,000 employees on almost every continent, whose level of professionalism continues to grow</p>	<p>A HISTORY</p> <p>A personal destiny which, over the last 40 years, has been transformed into an inspiring and remarkable collective adventure and success story</p>
<p>POSITIONING</p> <p>A leading position in the provision of services to industry and in the manufacture of equipment for the construction market</p>	<p>SUBSIDIARIES</p> <p>Some 200 active subsidiaries throughout the world, all recognised in their field and in the territories in which they operate</p>	<p>A PERFORMANCE</p> <p>Sales: €3,840m EBITDA: €525m Net profit: €138m Shareholders’ equity: €1377m Cash and equivalents: €1422m Debt: €639m</p>

What individual and collective challenges do we face because of our desire to:

- bring our vision of building a sustainable world to life;
- ensure sustainable growth;
- serve our customers better on every continent where we are present;
- attract, retain and develop our employees around the world?

What do we still need to achieve? What kind of growth does our ambition require? How are we going to achieve the performance we are aiming for? How are we going to engage tomorrow's employees in our vision in a world where competition for talent has intensified and candidates are more demanding of the companies they decide to join?

“Since the dawn of humanity, human beings have looked to the sky. They read the solstices there to mark the periodicity of agricultural life, they read the cardinal points for navigation, or sometimes they try to divine their destiny there. Deciphering the movements of the stars has enabled human beings to conceive another idea of the universe, one that is broader than that of their immediate surroundings. Whether at the centre of the universe or off-centre, what they read and what they said about it reflected what they believed themselves to be. The celestial vault, as macrocosm, will have been for them the immense mirror of their soul.”

VIRGINIA HASENBALG CORABIANU¹²

Traditionally, surpassing yourself in the workplace is presented as

- a strategy: dynamics, a movement that aims to encourage employees to leave their comfort zone and take on stimulating challenges to achieve ambitious goals;
- a goal: to improve productivity and competitiveness;
- resources: helping employees to develop their skills and increase their creativity, motivation and self-confidence.

What's more, surpassing yourself has the potential to strengthen a company's culture when employees are encouraged to work together towards a common goal in an environment conducive to growth and well-being.

How can we create the conditions for people to surpass themselves? It seems to us that this legitimate question should be preceded by another fundamental one: why and for what purpose should we encourage people to surpass themselves?

In other words, what would or could happen if we did nothing, if we didn't rise above ourselves, individually and collectively?

Is there an urgency or a necessity to surpass ourselves?

Surpassing yourself: a necessity or nice-to-have?

“There is only one thing in life that never changes, and that is change.”

CONFUCIUS

How do you surpass yourself? Is it possible to imagine our existence, our professional activity, completely devoid of surpassing ourselves?

As mentioned earlier, surpassing ourselves can be understood as leaving our comfort zone and entering a development zone that is necessarily less comfortable.

Our lives are punctuated by new experiences for which we were neither prepared nor trained, or were not sufficiently prepared, or even able to anticipate. While we can choose to avoid some that frighten us or deter us, we cannot avoid them all. Children face the challenges to stand up and walk, learn to speak, read, count and so on.

Surpassing ourselves can thus be understood as the essential adaptation to a transformation of our environment, our biology, our relationships, our objectives and so on, an adaptation without which we would be condemned to stagnation, regression and even death.

For an organisation, refusing to go beyond the basics would mean refusing to adapt to changes in its markets, its customers, its economic and geopolitical context, its mentalities, and would probably condemn it to obsolescence and disappearance. From this point of view, immobility and stagnation would signal the decline and endangerment of the company.

In this way, surpassing ourselves, whether individually or collectively, can be understood as the capacity we develop to be on the move, to accompany the flow of changes, ruptures and crises, to encourage some and reject others.

While it can sometimes be spectacular and exceptional, commanding admiration, it can also unfold quietly, more gradually, in small steps, with a view to sustainability, reproducibility and consolidation.

Fuelled by confidence and optimism, it takes the form of innovation, creativity, imagination and improvisation. It also requires training to acquire new skills, discipline and perseverance to establish new habits, and the courage to overcome our fears and aversion to risk.



Surpassing yourself: the core of performance

As we explored in our last seminar, optimism is synonymous with the “power to act”.

Unlike the pessimist who, when something bad happens, believes three things: (i) it’s permanent, it’s going to last forever; (ii) it’s contagious, it’s going to undermine everything I do; and (iii) it’s uncontrollable, there’s nothing I can do about it, an optimist, when something bad happens, thinks: (i) it’s temporary, (ii) it only concerns this situation and (iii) I can do something about it.

Performance is partly conditioned by a positive and optimistic state of mind. It is also the result of a combination of conditions (see above) which favour its emergence.

It’s up to us to think about what we can concretely – and ethically – do to:

- create the conditions for maintaining a certain level of optimism (below which taking action no longer makes sense or is no longer worthwhile) capable of releasing energies, developing motivation and commitment and encouraging individual and collective action;
- create the conditions for a reversal of the trend in situations where pessimism and defeatism predominate, 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 existence and will be there, in one way or another, forever.

From a company’s point of view, surpassing oneself as an individual, isolated and “accidental” event (which is nevertheless welcome) is less interesting than collective, reproducible and strategically constructed performance.

So we need to create the conditions that will, in particular:

- release energy and motivation;
- give everyone, individually and collectively, the means to connect with their resources and acquire new ones;
- encourage collaboration, mutual aid and support;
- allow people to be daring, show initiative and take measured risks;
- give meaning to our commitment and our actions.

According to numerous studies, including a 2017 study by MIT,¹³ what enables the creation of value for an organisation (and therefore performance), as measured in particular by the level of innovation, the level of profits and the level of customer satisfaction, has more to do with the experience of employees than with their well-being.

Employee experience is defined by the complexity of the work and the behavioural norms that influence employees’ ability to create value.

- Complexity refers to the degree of difficulty in carrying out tasks.
- Behavioural norms are understood as what is expected in terms of behaviour within the company. Specifically, the study shows that three behavioural norms in particular contribute to value creation and performance: (i) collaboration, (ii) creativity and (iii) empowerment/responsibility.

Experience is distinct from the notion of well-being, which is understood as the benefits and beliefs that contribute to a feeling of well-being and contentment in belonging to the company.

While we recognise the importance of the well-being of the Group’s employees, we would also like to invite you to think in terms of a global experience, favourable to the

fulfilment of each individual, the satisfaction of our stakeholders – first and foremost our customers – and the development of Altrad.

Setting up and deploying this global experience means, as we have already mentioned during previous seminars, giving priority to:

- digitising some of our processes to facilitate fluid communication of information and knowledge, ongoing training, self-learning, etc.;
- establishing communication channels to (i) identify sticking points, (ii) generalise the practice of feedback and self-corrective measures, (iii) encourage innovation, initiative-taking and proactivity to speed up the resolution of problems and difficulties, (iv) identify activities that do not create value and that consume undue energy;
- generalising accountability by clearly defining the scope of responsibility, the scope for autonomy, the transfer of powers and providing the necessary resources;
- clarifying vision, objectives and strategy;
- promoting initiatives and innovations undertaken by employees as part of the implementation of strategic priorities.

Surpassing yourself: the core of attractiveness

What made companies attractive in the past is no longer what makes them attractive to job applicants today. People's aspirations are changing, and companies are having to change alongside them if they are to remain attractive.

According to several surveys, employees want:

- a sense of community, collaboration, mutual aid and solidarity;
- a feeling of belonging to a group or a mission in line with their values;
- a clearer dividing line between working time and free time;
- the opportunity to develop, learn and grow;
- benefits (remuneration, title, in-kind benefits, etc.).

Altrad is no exception to this major societal trend, and must consolidate its ethical practices, abandon or change practices that have become obsolete, and invent new and innovative practices capable of arousing enthusiasm and support.

Surpassing yourself: the core of competition

The environment in which companies operate remains highly competitive.

Our survival and success depend on our ability to anticipate changes and needs, to innovate so that we can continue to satisfy our customers while minimising our environmental impact and costs, to control our growth and train high-performance teams.

As mentioned, it is important that we cultivate innovation, creativity, imagination and boldness so that Altrad's offer remains relevant to the needs of its markets and the expectations of its customers.

To be sustainable, a company must be ambidextrous: efficient in the short term and innovative for the long term.

In other words, it is a question of jointly promoting and developing exploration and exploitation capabilities and skills, which means promoting an ambidextrous approach to innovation that preserves the essential while adapting it to the transformation of the environment.

This ongoing dialogue between Altrad and the context in which the Group operates is a prerequisite for our continued relevance as a company.

Surpassing yourself: the essential characteristics of a performer

“Write your worries in sand and carve your blessings in stone.”

LAO TZU

“Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny.”

C. S. LEWIS

As discussed, the business world draws a great deal of its inspiration from that of sports: performance, results, competition, training, endurance, courage, surpassing yourself ... the references are countless.

“Knowing how to transpose the virtues of sport into the corporate world to adapt to a constantly changing environment and work as a team, in sometimes difficult conditions and without getting discouraged, is a valuable asset.”¹⁴

How can we encourage people to surpass themselves in the workplace? Are there certain preconditions, mindsets or cultures that are more conducive to surpassing yourself than others? Are certain individuals predisposed to surpassing themselves? If so, in what way?

Surpassing yourself as an isolated act that is difficult to reproduce, however glorious and impressive it may be, is of little interest to the corporate world.

With a view to creating value, an organisation strives to produce the conditions for sustainable collective performance.

This raises the question of a possible science of performance that would establish the conditions for the emergence of exceptional results, conditions that could be reproduced, shared and passed on.

Are there profiles of exceptional performers? If so, an obvious attitude would be for companies to recruit the best, the most promising “athletes”, the talents of tomorrow.

Can people be educated to surpass themselves? If the answer to this question is yes, then the challenge for companies is to create an environment that is conducive to developing talent. Through what practices?

For Giorgio Nardone, Director of the Strategic Therapy Centre in Arezzo, “what will enable the individual to excel is, time and again, a path nourished by talent combined with consistency, endurance and commitment, supported by a spirit of sacrifice, strong motivation and acceptance of the risk of failure”.¹⁵

What do these people have in common, those who have surpassed their own limits and sometimes what we thought a person was capable of doing?

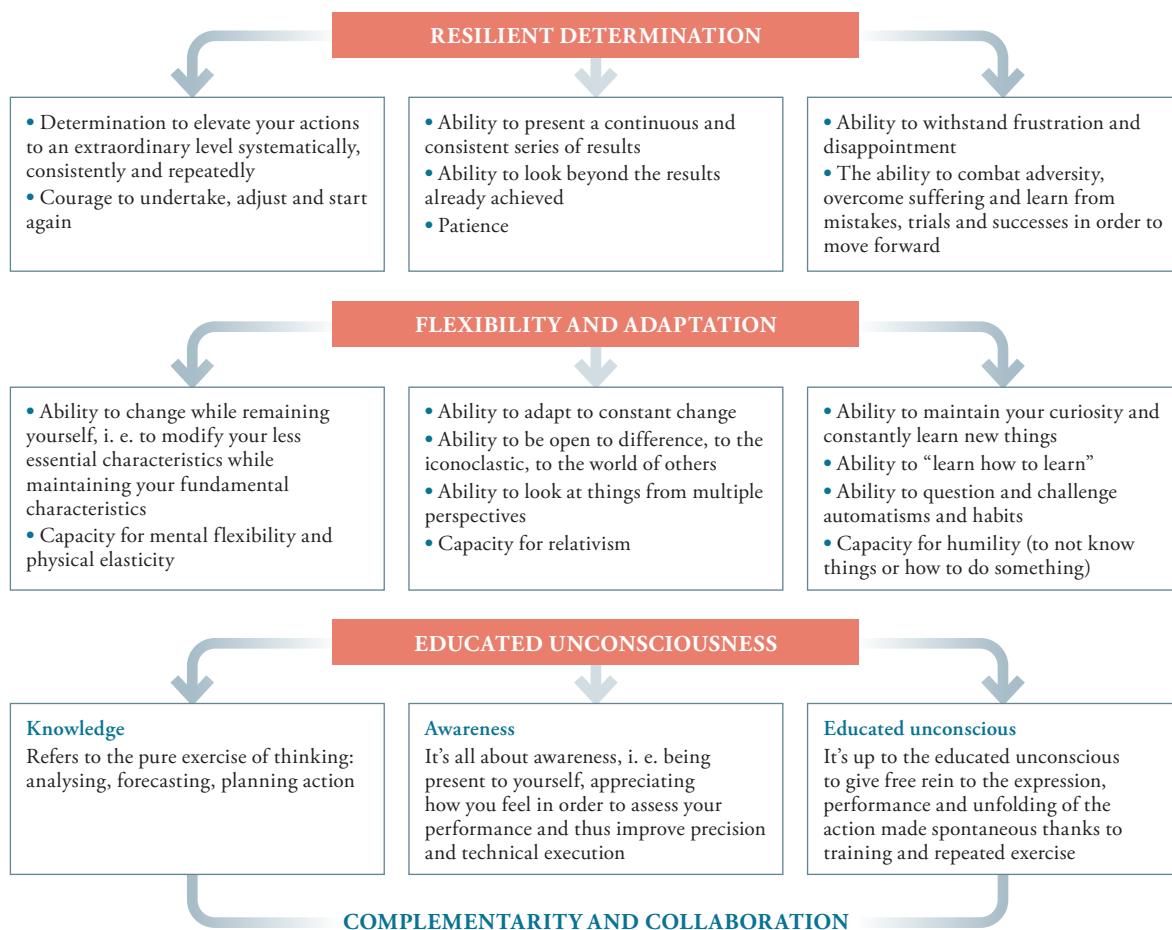
The psychologist William James defined genius as “the ability to perceive things from a non-ordinary perspective”. Is this different perception of the world enough?

For Nardone, the science of performance must combine three fundamental elements:

- a very high level of knowledge in a particular field;
- high-level training and;
- a performance ethic in which the game is played fairly (no doping, no cheating, etc.).

Performance is “systematically the result of a journey that involves fatigue and frustration and in which you have to know how to resist without ever giving up, but which, if followed with application and constancy, reserves great personal and professional satisfaction”.¹⁶

What happens from an “intrapyschic” point of view? In other words, what’s inside the heads of performers? Nardone lists a number of characteristics that can be found in performers: top athletes, artists, creators, managers and so on.



These traits – which take the form of invariables – nevertheless remain variable. Far from being acquired or permanently fixed, they are likely to evolve over time, testifying to the formidable cerebral, physical and emotional plasticity of individuals. So “we are neither born resilient nor determined, but we become so through repeated experience of difficulties and frustrations, taken on with a defined purpose”.¹⁷

The last part of this sentence is essential. As already indicated, the meaning of our efforts and the reasons why we undertake them play a major role in our ability to endure them. An effort in vain, without a goal, is just an effort. An effort directed towards an objective, accepted or sought after, and which transcends it, contributes to our elevation.

According to the latest neuroscientific research, most human activity (estimated at 80 per cent) takes place outside conscious thought. Does this mean that we are condemned to rely on our brain’s most automatic, unconscious and uncontrollable mechanisms? It is possible, in fact, to educate the most primitive part of our brain (the paleoencephalon) to

make atavistic mechanisms more efficient and profitable through repeated modelling and stimulation. Improved performance is the result of closer collaboration between knowledge, consciousness and the educated unconscious.

We are born (innate) and we become (acquired). Contrary to deterministic thinking, which defends the idea of predestination and the virtual impossibility of departing from it, we are convinced that, over the millennia, human beings have found the means to act on themselves and their environment, in particular by developing their direct abilities and by acquiring the technological means to assist themselves and overcome their biological limitations. This means that performance is not deterministic; it is not the exclusive result of innate talent. It is also the result of the stimulation of gifts and assiduous training over time. According to Protagoras a master synthesises a natural predisposition and constant exercise.

It is worth noting in passing that, on this basis, an environment that is devoid of obstacles, difficulties and frustrations and is smoothed out to excess would not allow traits such as resilience or determination to emerge. So for any organisation or family, the aim is not to deprive individuals of experiences that are conducive to their growth and their ability to excel, but perhaps to strategically organise the trials to which they are subjected. This paradoxical and potentially controversial thinking is food for thought at a time and in a Western society founded precisely on an ideal of well-being that is pursued from childhood, an ideal that – potentially – deprives children of the obstacles essential to the emergence of their resilience.

Surpassing yourself: the conditions for implementation

Giving meaning and creating interest and motivation

- Co-constructing or sharing a vision:

The seminar devoted to Altrad's *raison d'être* enabled us to work on the importance of a common, shared vision that unites and engages. It is in fact desirable, if not essential, to define common objectives and to specify how each person's work fits into a longer-term vision. Apart from a situation of imminent danger, there can be no surpassing without tension towards an attractive goal.

- Offering stimulating assignments:

Offering stimulating and ambitious tasks gives everyone the opportunity to excel. As we mentioned earlier in our discussion on comfort, development and danger zones, it is important to strike the right balance between achievable goals and challenges that stimulate creativity and performance.

- Cultivating optimism:

Our 2023 seminar enabled us to reflect on the importance of a culture of optimism as a catalyst for both personal and collective success.

- Valuing individual and collective excellence:

Developing a collaborative culture and organisation in which solidarity, mutual aid and support are encouraged helps to create cohesive teams capable of rising to the challenges they set themselves or that the context imposes on them. Valuing excellence means seeking it out, facilitating it and rewarding it. Celebrating successes, being able to assess performance in order to improve it, accepting setbacks and frustrations: these are all experiences that can be shared.

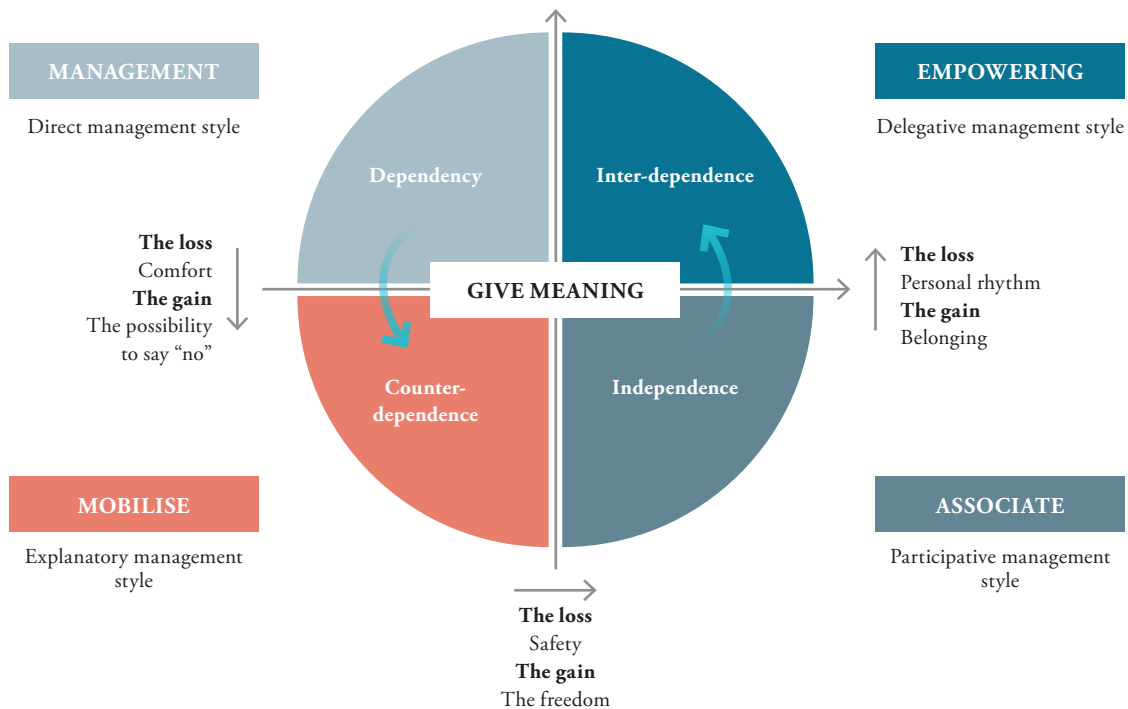
Increasing exposure to difficulties and demands

Helping your employees to grow means exposing them to increasing, evolving and varied challenges in a reasoned way, while offering them support and encouragement, and providing them with the appropriate resources.

Any managerial action that seeks to deprive employees of such experiences in the name of a misguided ideal of well-being could end up depriving them of opportunities for growth and, more broadly, could have a negative impact on the organisation’s development.

There is absolutely no question of promoting abusive or toxic management methods that lead to stress or burnout. On the contrary, it’s about honouring the part of many people that aspires to grow and creating the conditions for professional and responsible support to foster such development.

The autonomy cycle, coupled with the situational leadership model, illustrates the progressive and differentiated (that is, individualised) support that should be put in place to enable employees to grow in autonomy and responsibility.



Allowing room for error, initiative, autonomy and experimentation, and encouraging responsibility

To grow, an organisation must surpass itself, in other words, try new things, develop new products or services, dare to explore new horizons.

There is no audacity without risk-taking.

There can be no risk-taking without a context that is prepared to accept that performance is a construction, a series of trials, attempts and adjustments that unfold and are perfected over time.

It's not a question of aiming for perfection, but rather of seeing surpassing ourselves as part of a constant search for improvement and an openness to improvement.

For there to be improvement, it is important to be able to state what has worked and what has not, to understand the interactional loops and unsuccessful attempts at solutions that lead to the persistence of problems, and to acquire the economic, human and technical resources capable of transforming the experience and having a positive impact on performance.

In particular, this means carrying out post-mortems to understand what can or must be improved, giving constructive feedback that can mobilise people and commit them to solutions and progress, making everyone accountable, at their own level, and providing individuals and teams with the means to fulfil their responsibilities, recognising successes to celebrate success and increase confidence, encouraging collaboration because no success is entirely individual.

Creating the conditions for continuous learning

Surpassing yourself is, by definition, a learning and educational experience. Developing and acquiring new skills and expertise are the cornerstones of continuous progress (see below).

SURPASSING YOURSELF, COMMITMENT AND WELL-BEING AT WORK – MASTERING THE CONDITIONS FOR ECOLOGICAL PERFORMANCE FOR EVERYONE

Well-being and development – Expectations and our initial response

Our relationship with work depends on the time, country and culture in which we live.

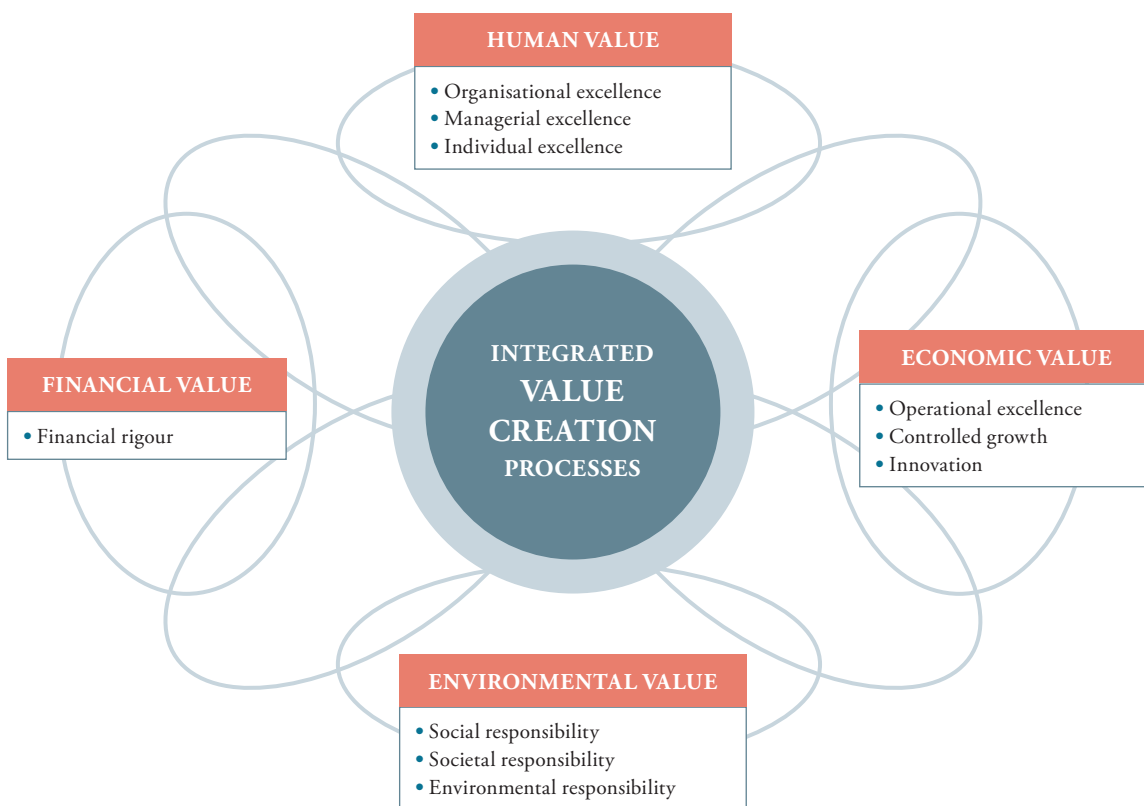
In recent years, the way work is organised has been turned upside down by a series of social and technical changes:

- People's aspirations have evolved: the quest for meaning, well-being, mutual respect and recognition, and autonomy, to name but a few, are shaping a new body of expectations.
- The education of new generations, their relationship with authority and digital tools are changing working relationships, starting with managerial interactions.
- The development of artificial intelligence is challenging the way we work and some of our jobs.
- Robotisation both frees workers from repetitive and difficult tasks and also threatens the so-called less-skilled jobs.

More recently, following the coronavirus crisis, what has come to be known as the *great resignation* is shaking up the labour market. Human “resources” have never been so aptly named, against a backdrop of dwindling talent and difficulties in attracting and retaining skills. We'll be taking a closer look at this vital issue at a forthcoming seminar.

What organisational, structural and cultural changes are these transformations inviting us to make?

As mentioned in previous seminars and above, as a multinational Group we have many areas of work and development to align our organisation (from every perspective) with our vision, our performance objectives and obligations.



The following paragraphs show each of these areas in isolation. It is important to remember that working on one of the areas of value creation helps to produce value not only in that area but also in all the other identified areas. The diagram above illustrates the interdependence of our efforts and actions and their consequences.

Surpassing ourselves in human terms – Creating the conditions for development and well-being

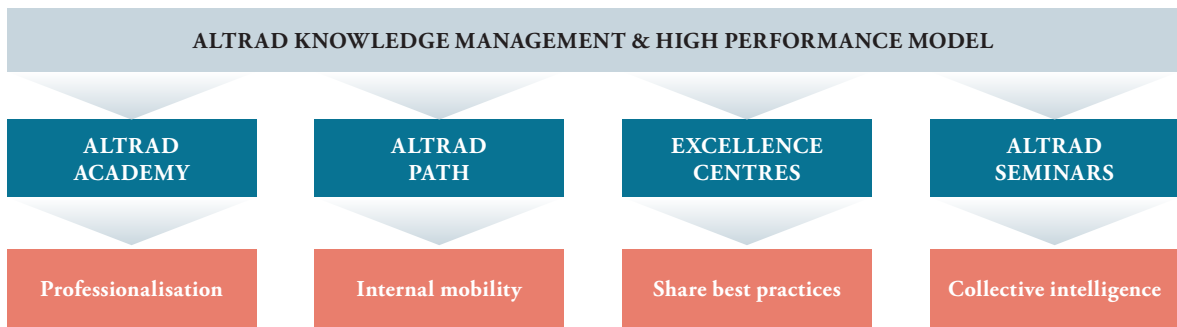
HUMAN VALUE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational excellence • Managerial excellence • Individual excellence

Creating the conditions for individual development

In 2019 we worked on the continuous development of each individual. We emphasised that creating value and building excellence depend on the skills of the entire organisation and all those involved.

We considered the structuring and dissemination of a new model of excellence – the Altrad Knowledge Management & High Performance Model – through the implementation, deployment and/or increased development of a global and ongoing programme (life-long learning) based on four main axes: the Altrad Academy, the Altrad Career Path, the Centres of Excellence and the Altrad Seminars.

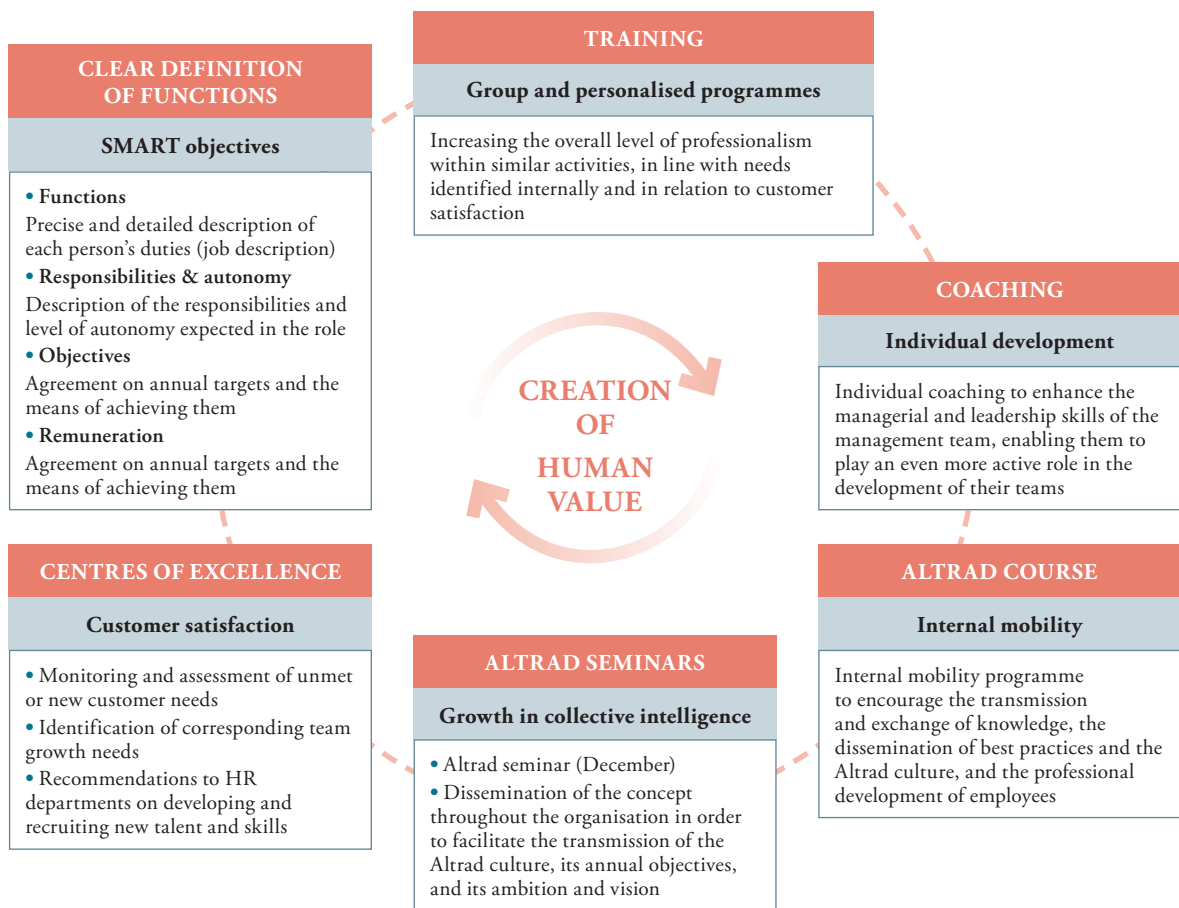
We are convinced that offering those we seek to recruit and retain the means of pursuing their professional development within Altrad is a strong argument not only at the time of recruitment, but also throughout their career within the Group.



In particular, the aim is to create the conditions for the success of

- their on-boarding;
 - their work and objectives;
 - their professional development;
- which takes the form of a complete itinerary:

Professional Development Path for Altrad Employees



Giving meaning and value to different roles

The quest for meaning, the desire to participate in a role or a company that makes a positive contribution to society and the world, are increasingly widespread demands. We are responding to this, in part, through the choices we have made recently. By adopting the rationale of a company with a mission, by adopting a demanding goal in terms of CSR (see below), Altrad intends to give meaning to its roles and professions. We believe that this is a key factor in commitment, motivation and loyalty to the Group.

In addition, we would like to open up a new line of thinking on how work is organised, inspired in part by the work of the German philosopher Axel Honneth. For him, it is important “to reorganise in concrete terms the activity of those who deserve esteem and respect [and who, given the way work is still organised in many organisations, are deprived of it today], so that these people stop seeing their work as a hollow and purely symbolic gesture. True recognition, true respect, means creating the material conditions that would justify expressions of esteem. ... This means questioning the division of labour itself.”¹⁸

Would it be possible to think about an even more cross-functional, multidisciplinary organisation and to rethink a division of labour model that is more often than not inherited from economic and political conflicts rather than functional constraints or technological necessities?

Certain functions that require a low level of qualification offer the company the advantage of making relatively cheap labour available. For these employees, a low level of qualification means easier access to the labour market.

And yet, against a backdrop of increasing education and the postponement of the retirement age, repetitive, exhausting or arduous jobs are increasingly being abandoned. How can we reinvent the reorganisation of activities and restructure jobs to enable everyone to take on more responsible roles and less monotonous tasks?

Creating the conditions for well-being

As mentioned at the Altrad 2023 seminar on the impact of optimism on the Group’s growth, for several decades now, managerial literature has been full of references to optimism, happiness and well-being. As mentioned above, recent research into happiness by the positive psychology movement establishes a correlation, and even a causal link, between happiness and economic performance: happier employees perform better.

Well-being cannot be decreed. It cannot be imposed. It is not automatic. It is the possible result of a set of conditions, sometimes necessary, sometimes essential, which generate it if they are fulfilled sufficiently or in a sufficiently lasting way.

Our efforts must be focused on putting in place, deploying and consolidating the conditions to which we have been committed for several years.

Surpassing ourselves economically – Creating growth

ECONOMIC VALUE

- Operational excellence
- Controlled growth
- Innovation

Operational excellence

As we discussed at our 2018 and 2019 Altrad seminars, a company’s effectiveness depends very largely on the ability of its players (internal and external) to work together, to coordinate their actions with a view to achieving shared

PROMOTING OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Promoting and reinforcing operational excellence, an essential factor in creating the trust our customers place in us

- Reaffirming the value of excellence at all levels of the organisation
- Increase skills levels to support business development through the acquisition of new talent, in-house training, coaching, sharing best practices, on-the-job development, careful on-boarding processes, etc.
- Improve the quality of internal communication and collaboration to ensure the best possible alignment and understanding of respective responsibilities and common/individual objectives

Creating centres of excellence

- Identify best practices, operational processes and solutions with a view to sharing and disseminating them across the Group
- Increase organisational learning (self-learning company) (KPIs, evaluations, feedback, etc.)

INSPIRE MAXIMUM CONFIDENCE

objectives, to harmonise their professional practices, to communicate effectively, and to collaborate on a day-to-day basis and in situations of crisis or tension.

The term collective intelligence, now very much in vogue, provides a conceptual framework for the approach outlined above. It refers to an organisation's ability to adapt to its environment and context, and to choose the means of action best suited to a given situation or objective. It also implies the participation of everyone in this adaptive process, which does not exclude different levels of involvement and responsibility. It assumes that as many people as possible accept the approach's validity.

From our point of view, at a company level the creation of organisational value is achieved through the development of collective intelligence, which is a "natural" corollary of matrix operations.

The matrix structure that Altrad has adopted for many years provides space for the expression of a high level of collective intelligence.

Creating organisational value presupposes that we are able to make the most of our organisational framework.

Numerous studies have been carried out to identify the mechanisms that provide access to collective intelligence. These include the research of Karl Weick, Professor Emeritus of Organizational Behavior and Psychology at the University of Michigan, which focuses primarily on the development of meaning. For what purpose and in what way does the collective manage to organise itself, particularly when there is an unexpected and substantial change in the environment?

Attentive to organisational processes, Weick has been particularly interested in organisations where reliability is a critical, if not vital, issue (nuclear power stations, hospital operating theatres, air traffic control towers, etc.).

In his view, several factors contribute to the development of collective intelligence in so-called high reliability organisations:¹⁹

- The preoccupation with failure, which leads to increased vigilance and greater transparency. Any error must be reported so that it can be analysed and not concealed to avoid blame.
- The reluctance to simplify, which should be reflected in incentives to deal with complexity, even at the cost of conflict. This means providing mechanisms for highlighting and managing disagreements. Humility then becomes a virtue.
- The overall view of the system makes it possible to understand the links between the various elements and to anticipate their mutual effects.
- Resilience as the ability to recover and react quickly to the unexpected. This is a difficult mechanism to adopt, since the natural tendency is to react in a hurry by resorting to what is most familiar to us. Resilience, on the other hand, means being creative, improvising and striking the right balance between caution and risk-taking.
- The ability to restructure, which means that in an emergency the most appropriate structure, possibly planned in advance, but not always, must prevail.

As mentioned in our earlier articles, a balance needs to be struck between flexibility and rigidity, control and trust, decentralisation and centralisation, experience and expertise.

This presupposes an organisation based on a collaborative culture that fosters high levels of efficiency, dynamism and flexibility.

The emergence, implementation and reinforcement of collective intelligence depend on:

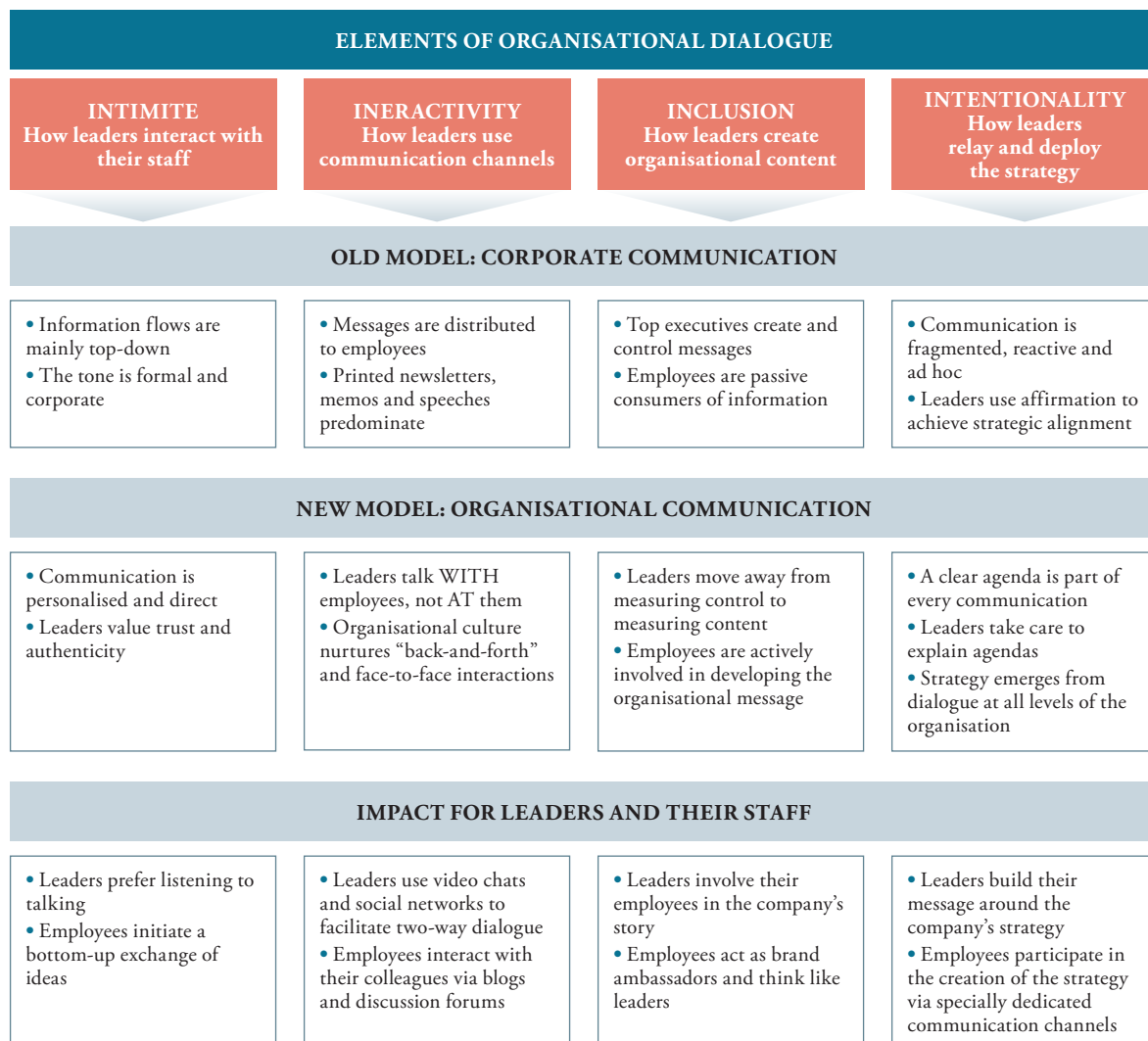
- a system of values that are known, shared and inspiring, and that are likely to create among employees a strong sense of belonging to the story the Group proposes;
- the introduction of meta-principles, standards and norms to maximise interoperability and facilitate exchanges between the Group's various entities;
- the development of an integrated information system enabling (i) the pooling and free circulation of information essential to the Group's smooth running, (ii) effective intra- and inter-functional collaboration, and (iii) greater decision-making responsiveness;
- overall employee development;
- belief in the interdependence of the elements of the system and therefore in the community of interests, in the name of which there is a quasi-logical obligation for any given individual to see themselves as part of a group of players whose future depends on their own and vice versa;
- the ability to create the conditions for reflection, communication and the deployment of a common or shared vision.

The notion of cooperation (and collaboration) is central to the emergence of collective intelligence:

- wanting to cooperate/collaborate;
- knowing how to cooperate/collaborate;
- being able to cooperate/collaborate.

No cooperation is possible without effective multi-directional communication.

Managerial excellence



Surpassing ourselves ethically – Creating social, societal and environmental value

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUE

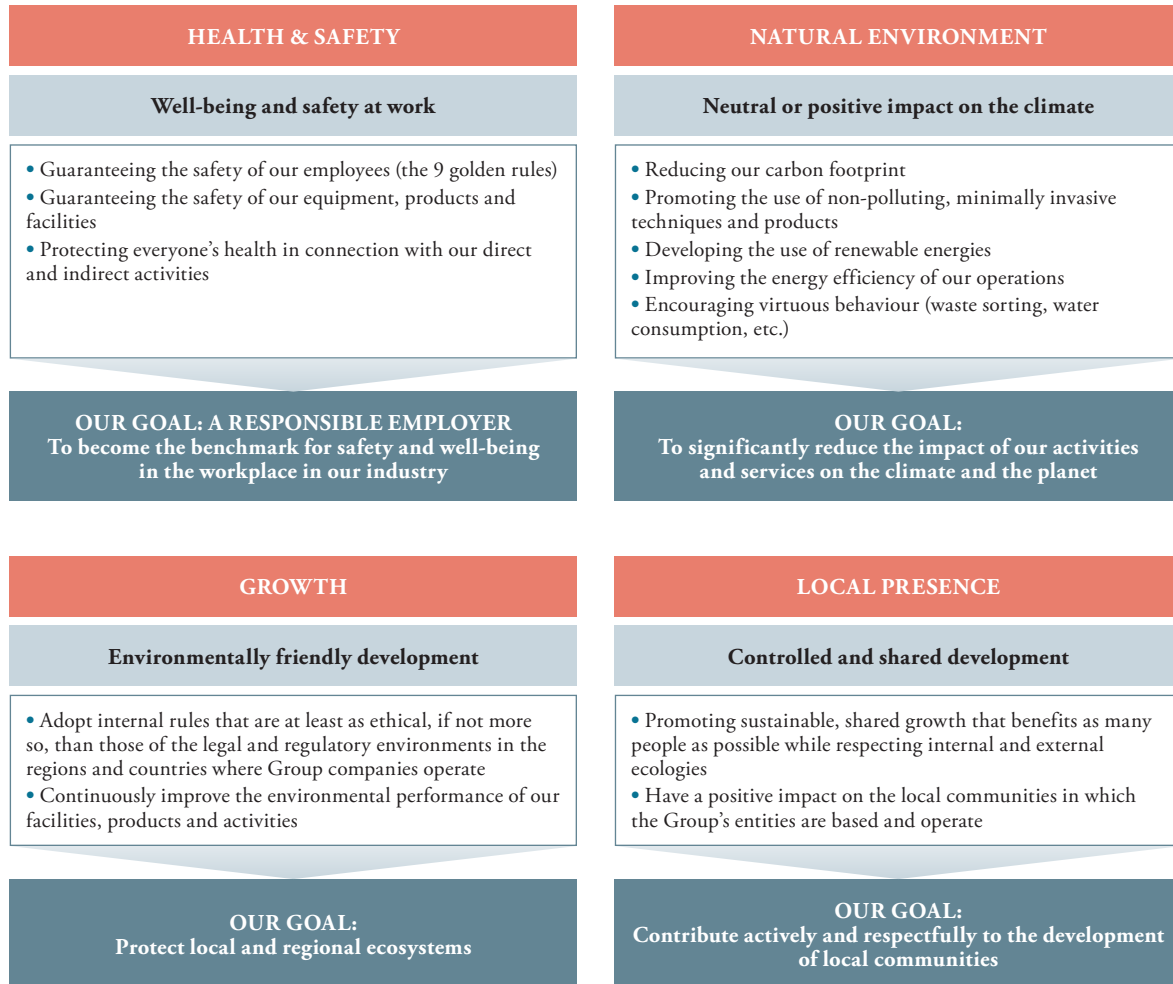
- Social responsibility
- Societal responsibility
- Environmental responsibility

Aware of the challenges facing the global environment and the need to (i) protect and make rational use of natural resources, (ii) respect the major ecological balances as far as possible, (iii) promote the protection of our employees in their workplaces, which can be exposed sites, and (iv) participate in the development of local communities, Altrad has set itself ambitious and demanding CSR objectives over the last few years.

The seminar devoted to our *raison d’être* was an invitation to collectively go further: to establish ourselves as a company with a mission, which is obvious in a culture such

as Altrad’s, which places respect at the heart of its relationships. This had to include respect for the environment, for our laws and regulations, and for the society in which we operate.

Altrad: An Ambitious CSR Commitment, an Ethical and Virtuous Group



It is up to us to pursue our commitment to CSR excellence and to identify the corresponding areas of value creation. Our objective is simple: to make Altrad a virtuous and ethical group, and the benchmark in its sector of activity in the four areas mentioned above.

Sustainable development is no longer an option, but an imperative. Contributing to the development of the communities and regions in which we operate is an integral part of our raison d’être. The well-being and safety at work of our employees and external contractors are not negotiable; they are the foundation on which our performance and ambition are built.

GUARANTEEING SAFETY AND ETHICS

Promoting irreproachable behaviour and conduct, and developing a culture of compliance

- Respect for ethics and internal values
- Compliance with the law and competition regulations
- Preventing corruption
- Implementation of a compliance programme and dedicated teams at all levels of the Group (training, best practices, etc.)

Implementing the highest level of security

For facilities, goods and systems to provide our customers and employees with a safe and reliable environment

Encouraging eco-responsibility with a view to sustainability

Extended to all our products and services

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESPONSIBLE WORLD

So, as we mentioned earlier, surpassing yourself in CSR terms takes the form of a triple resource or value-creation path that touches on the four areas above:

- replenishing the planet;
- revitalising local and regional communities and territories;
- reinvigorating the people of the Altrad Group.

It is up to us to come up with ways of contributing to this renewal. It seems to us that these commitments – strong and ambitious – are in line with the quest for meaning and the need to embody high values that younger generations are demanding.

For the record, here are some of the avenues that have already been explored:

Creating value for the planet means replenishing it through:

- Sustainable and responsible management of the natural resources that go into the composition and manufacture of our products, which are impacted by our service and transport activities, and that are potentially affected by our industrial processes.
- An active and demanding contribution to the fight against climate change.
- A relentless determination to preserve, restore and promote the biodiversity that is essential to the preservation of life and the habitability of our planet.

Creating value for local communities and regions means revitalising them through

- Inventing and building new relationship models that respect the interests and cultures of each party.
- The desire to devise and develop bilateral and multilateral value-creation models.
- Strengthening (i) the economic and ecological development of the regions and (ii) their attractiveness to promote their dynamism and the well-being of their populations.
- Participation in (i) setting up essential activities and (ii) maintaining services essential to people's health and development.
- Setting up educational programmes designed to support or give rise to local education or integration initiatives for children and people in situations of great vulnerability or exclusion.

Creating value for the people of the Altrad Group means recharging their batteries through

- Guaranteeing a safe, secure and healthy working environment, conducive to the well-being of the Group's employees.
- Putting in place the right conditions (see *Altrad Knowledge Management & High Performance Model*) to encourage the professional development of each individual, the commitment of each member of staff and the growth of all.
- Defending human rights, respecting diversity and protecting fundamental social rights, in strict compliance with the law.

Our current management systems already ensure the implementation of these areas of resourcing. However, it is up to us to take a thorough look at them and identify any obstacles and pitfalls to value creation.

Our determination to reinforce the measures already taken in these areas must remain strong. It must be accompanied by a certain change in mentality, at all levels of the company, in the knowledge that we now benefit from a supportive (if not restrictive) environment, capable of sustaining our efforts.

The Altrad values of respect, solidarity, courage, humility and conviviality are, we believe, vehicles that are conducive to the circulation of our CSR message not only internally, but also beyond the Group's borders.

Surpassing ourselves us financially – Creating financial value for all

FINANCIAL VALUE

- Financial rigour

Creating financial value for all involves creating the conditions for a high-performance organisation and promoting the sharing of the value created. Our previous seminars have given us the opportunity to work on both of these aspects.

It should be remembered that the Group is committed to financial performance through a rigorous financial management system.

In terms of financial rigour, our approach must be based simultaneously on two principles:

- Regular measurement and evaluation of the performance of the Group's subsidiaries and holding company in order to (i) monitor their financial health and (ii) enable decisions and adjustments to be made in the most favourable conditions in terms of time and information.
- A rationale for identifying value and cash traps, that is, practices which, (i) through a lack of appropriate control or attention, or (ii) through negligence or ignorance of their impact, result in significant financial losses (such as losses in the economic and financial value of unsold stock).

It is up to us to equip ourselves with the financial indicators and dashboards that will enable us to monitor our performance as reliably and as "in real time" as possible, and to develop control tools so that they remain relevant in a context of rapid change for the Group and transformation of the economic environment, in order to best inform our decisions and maintain solid performance. Altrad's viability and long-term future also depend on these conditions.

In addition to assessing its economic and financial performance, we have opted to measure Altrad's excellence and success in terms of

- the quality of our products and services, which influences the level of satisfaction of our internal and external customers (operational and cross-functional aspects);
- the quality of our logistics, decision-making and production processes (vertical and hierarchical aspects);
- the quality of collaboration (horizontal and joint aspects);
- the quality of employee development in terms of soft and hard skills (bilateral and interpersonal relationship aspects).

For many years, Altrad has adopted a humanist and mature vision of the role of organisations, according to which companies not only participate in the development of their players and stakeholders, but are also more broadly committed to the preservation and development of their environment. This strong conviction, combined with a more rigorous legal and regulatory framework, has led us to adopt and implement a demanding policy in terms of social and environmental responsibility.

The trend towards the financialisation of companies and their increasing subordination to short-term interests is both the source and the consequence of the attention that has long been focused almost exclusively on satisfying shareholder expectations with a view to maximising profits.

At the risk of repetition, we are convinced that the creation of value understood in a narrow and restrictive way, that is in strictly financial terms, has had its day. In any case, we have chosen to distance ourselves from this excessively narrow and restrictive definition and to favour a more realistic, but also fairer and more reasonable, framework: value is a polysemous concept; it has multiple facets that converge, sometimes defiantly, towards satisfying the interests of all the company's stakeholders.

One of the major challenges is to reconcile shareholder value with 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 and, more broadly, on the living world and society as a whole.

We are convinced that this is a feature of the Altrad Group's credentials that must be shared and even championed, particularly during our recruitment processes, so that talented people considering joining the Group can be made aware of this fundamental aspect of our culture.



CONCLUSION

It is, perhaps, our desire to live life to the fullest that drives us to surpass ourselves. The desire for glory, conquest, the need to survive, the need to shine, the desire to express our potential, to be the first or the best ... the reasons that drive us to push beyond our limits are many and sometimes more complicated than they may seem.

This powerful desire projects us into the future, committing us to the path of development and growth. It both weakens and strengthens us.

Under what conditions can we surpass ourselves in a way that is ecological for ourselves, for others and for the world? Aspirations of greatness, excellence, progress and going beyond our own selves are driving us to tremendous growth. But they can also be dangerous if they lead us to abandon all caution and indulge in lethal or damaging excesses.

Who do we really surpass? The idea we have of ourselves, the person we thought we were until now? The person you were and are ready to leave behind?

Or is it a question of overcoming something within, something that holds us back and prevents us from expressing our potential, which is sometimes yet to be revealed? A fear, a complex? Do we go beyond ourselves to live better with ourselves, to love ourselves better, to be better accepted by others?

Are we pushing beyond our limits because the pace of the world is forcing us to rush forward, encouraging us to make continuous progress that is impossible to resist? Are we, like Icarus, pursuing an unattainable dream, chasing a pipe dream at the risk of burning our wings, or is the meaning of humanity to keep improving again and again?

Do the laws of economy as they unfold in the world today condemn us to ever greater performance, at the risk of losing sight of the meaning of our actions and their consequences?

“We lead our lives always forward, by the desire to live, granted by nature. This desire to live incites us to refuse death, and confronts us with suffering, the representative of which is the fear of death.”²⁰ This defines the essence of the approach taken by Shoma Morita, a Japanese psychologist who was a contemporary of Sigmund Freud. It calls for obedience to nature and acceptance of symptoms and suffering as they are. Paradoxically, this acceptance opens the way to a form of transcendence: the acceptance and recognition of constraints that are beyond our control and against which it is futile to fight. Doesn't making peace with our humanity also mean accepting that we are not all-powerful?

Surpassing Yourself

What would we do if we weren't afraid? Afraid of failing, of making mistakes, of suffering, of dying, of succeeding, of arousing envy?
Perhaps we would live.

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NARRATIVES



STORY 1

SURPASSING YOURSELF

Illustration 1

Leading points

Surpassing yourself requires talent, steadfastness, endurance, tenacity and courage. It means drawing on untapped resources within yourself.

It demands motivation and accepting the risk of failure.

In the context of continuous performance, it is not the same as a single, isolated heroic act. It is about repeating the exploit.

It includes a certain degree of preparation, and even a potentially transferable methodology. In this respect, we can speak of the science of performance.

Pitch

Ulysses, a thirty-something with everything that is supposed to make you happy, suddenly quits his Parisian life. He finds refuge in the Pyrenees, wandering alone and at length in search of his identity. Faced with the harshness of the mountains, his courage is put to the test. Will he be able to surpass himself?

Characters

- Ulysses
- Astrid, his fiancée
- Candice, the dog-sitter
- Tom, Ulysses's friend

Locations

- A chic Parisian flat
- The Pyrenees

*If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:
If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"*

Ulysses pauses in his reading. He has jotted down these verses by Rudyard Kipling in his travel diary. Just in case. Now he knows them by heart. Because since he left, he's had plenty of opportunities to re-read them.

"Am I a man now?" he asks himself, as the sun lights up the peaks before him. Isn't the simple fact that he's asking himself this question the answer he's been waiting for? Maybe. Probably. He sighs.

Mechanically, he strokes his beard, his "clock". It's already been many weeks since he suddenly left what he ironically calls civilisation. Yet he had told his friends time and time again that he couldn't stand the frantic pace, where every day was just like the last: get up, get dressed, take the metro, work non-stop until the evening, and then go home to crash in front of Netflix. When the weather's nice, he would take a scooter. A departure from his routine.

— What kind of life is this? he said to his companions as they downed their third bottle of Bordeaux. Honestly, we work like crazy. What's the point?

— It's true, we do! We work like crazy, but we're loaded! Tom retorted, raising his glass and inviting everyone to join him in a toast. Which they did, shouting "Here's to the money", clinking their glasses.

More out of habit than from desire, Ulysses joined his friends in the toasting. But he didn't laugh along with them. His heart wasn't in it. Not anymore. To be honest, he had long felt that he was drifting. With no destination. No purpose. No faith. He took a sip. A Saint-Estèphe. Delicious.

It's true that he had made it. In the way society defines success: a well-paid executive position in a listed company, a flat in a sought-after neighbourhood, a fiancée that men turned to look at when they walked into a bar or restaurant, mates galore. Sometimes he even felt a sort of disgust at so much money, so many privileges. He hated his own ingratitude. He felt bad about biting the hand that feeds.

But he had to admit it. He wasn't happy. It was as simple as that. And just as tragic. All this, this life, all these futile and superficial things he filled his life with. All pointless. Nothing had any meaning any more.

—Aren't you exaggerating a bit? Astrid sometimes asked him, her voice soft and slightly mocking.

—What do you mean?

—Well, look around you.

The view from their fifth-floor Parisian flat was breathtaking. A picture postcard. Totally Instagrammable! declared Candice, the vet student who came every day to walk their dog Penelope, the first time she entered their home. She immediately took out her mobile phone.

—Do you mind?

—No mention of the address, no pictures of the photos, no way of recognising the place. Okay? Astrid said by way of reply.

—I'm fine with that. And Penelope, can I take a picture of her?

—You'll have to ask her. So, Penelope, you want your moment of glory too?

Astrid and Candice had pretended that the dog had understood them and agreed to being posted on social networks. The photo of her with her front paws on the wrought iron balcony with the Eiffel Tower in the background went viral. Several hundred thousand views. Crazy! commented a jaded Ulysses.

—Ulys, don't you think you've got every reason to be happy right now? Astrid came closer, languorously.

—Maybe I do. I don't know. I don't know any more.

—Are you kidding?! All your mates envy you, starting with my exes. Can't you just be a little happy? You're starting to be a bit of a drag ...

No, he couldn't cheer up. He couldn't do it anymore. It was beyond him. He had tried. On his mother's advice, he'd even gone to see a shrink. For a while, before he got fed up. It wasn't working. The therapist had said something like, "Either be happy, or get rid of it all". He didn't like ultimatums. Or binary choices. Besides, he couldn't wait any longer. A sense of urgency was beginning to grow inside him, a kind of impatience he didn't know he had. A mixture of distress and survival instinct. A vital force. Something unstoppable. He called to postpone the next session. Then called again to say that, no sorry, he had a diary conflict. I'll call you back. He never called back.

After that, things moved quickly. One sleepless night, as he was scrolling on his mobile, he came across a line written in white over a photo of the Himalayas: "Happy is he who, like Ulysses, has made a beautiful journey." It was stupid, he already knew that line. Of course he did. Why was it that reading Joaquim du Bellay's words that night had sent a jolt through his body? He still couldn't explain it, any more than he had been able to explain it at the time. He had sat as if transfixed, staring at the mountain. Not pensive, but as if drawn in. By the image, by the promise of escape, by the possibility of an elsewhere to which he intuitively, sensorially understood that his whole being aspired. An aspiration, literally and figuratively. His body was magnetised, pulled away from its place, surrounded by cushions, to the ridge lines flickering on his laptop's screen. A magnetic wave right down his spine, which first froze him and then flung him from the sofa. An hour later he was getting into an Uber. "Gare Montparnasse", he said, realising as he did that the driver already knew his destination.

To this day, he doesn't know how long he stayed like that, absorbed in his nocturnal contemplation, already travelling, finally breathing. Once he'd emerged from his daze,

before he ordered the Uber, he'd taken a few minutes to write a note to Astrid. Brief, concise, knowing that she wouldn't understand anyway. Neither she nor the others. How could she? It was all so sudden. No clue. Nothing to prepare her for his act, his decision. The brutality of the surprise.

He had often thought about what she must have gone through the following morning, her surprise at not finding him there, her annoyance at her unanswered calls echoing off the walls of the empty flat, her eventual anger at his sheer lack of respect. No! It was an affront! Her anxiety at the silence. And finally, her distress at the lack of understanding, the doubt, the guilt.

She had thought they loved each other! For ever and ever. She had started leaving wedding magazines lying around the living room. So he might pick up on the message she was sending him in a less and less subliminal way. Could she have got it so wrong? Could her body, her heart, have deceived her so completely? You don't do something like that to someone you love! Several weeks after his departure, she was still coming out with this helpless sentence to anyone who would listen. There was nothing worse than incomprehension. Apart from its companion, powerlessness, perhaps.

She was furious that she couldn't find any soothing answers in the maze of her endless questions. She ruminated day and night, scanning through the last few years, dissecting every word exchanged, every text sent. She reviewed every detail that her memory offered her, even questioning her own sensations, her own lucidity. Astrid couldn't accept the unacceptable. The abandonment.

From a distance, Ulysses could see all this. It hurt him, obviously, deeply. He loved Astrid. Completely. With all his being. He knew from the day they met that she was the one and only, the definitive one. He loved her spirit, her lightness, her humour, her style. The smell of her hair, the scent of her lips, the softness of her hands as she cradled his face before kissing him. He loved everything about her. The memory of her crushed him every time. Finally, he hid her photo under a stone. He didn't want to see her face or her body. It was too painful. As for his mobile, the battery had run out long ago. A few hours after his arrival in the Pyrenees. He had left Paris without recharging it.

Despite the desire for her that wouldn't go away, despite the guilt he couldn't manage to appease, he couldn't bring himself to go back. To reassure her. Astrid. His parents. His friends. To explain. To ask for forgiveness. It was beyond him. This irrepressible and persistent need to cut ties. Again. To disappear. For a while.

Even as he watched the last blaze of sun on the peaks disappearing into the growing darkness, he knew he wasn't ready yet. Am I a man now?

No.

How could his rucksack have slipped out of his hand just as he was getting to his feet, planning to set up his tent before nightfall? How could he have made such a beginner's mistake? As he watched his belongings fall down a few metres, he swore at his clumsiness and carelessness. Luckily, his rucksack had become stuck on a narrow promontory. He studied the face of the rock and its roughness. A seasoned climber, he quickly spotted the holds he could use to climb down. His gear lay there, twenty metres below. It was going to be an awkward descent, especially as he couldn't see very well. But he had no choice. It was going to be a cold, possibly even a damp night. He didn't have a fleece with him. Nor even a water bottle. He had to get his rucksack.

He looked up at the sky. It would be a week before the full moon. For now, he would have to make do with a faint glow and the soon-to-be starry sky. Before setting off along the rock face, he took the time to imagine and visualise each stage of his climb down. He practised the descent in his mind until he could feel the sequence of movements in his hands, arms and legs. He allowed himself to take risks, but he had no right to make mistakes. Not now. Not here. Here, it would be fatal. His rope, dangling from his bag, was also resting a few metres below.

After rehearsing his moves mentally several times, he took a deep breath and began to climb down. Luckily, the rock was still dry. Soon, however, he felt perspiration dampening his palms and fingers. When he managed to secure a hold, he wiped one hand and then the other on his shorts. Sweat trickled down his neck and back as the temperature dropped. He tried to control the shiver running down his spine. Concentrating, he performed the choreography he had imagined earlier, happy, foothold after foothold, to be able to carry out the plan he had devised. Without a hitch. He was pleased that the rock face was so compact, that there was no crumbling to mar the sheer drop to the valley. Now that he was getting closer to the promontory, he noticed new irregularities in the rock, more suited to his free descent. He skilfully placed one foot, then the other, taking care to limit his reach. Without a rope to secure his movements, he had to climb down carefully. He inhaled deeply, accompanying each of his acrobatics with regular breathing, using his breath to pace his efforts and control his mind.

He didn't hear the golden eagle approaching. By the time he realised it was bearing down on him, it was too late. The hold gave way under his right hand. His left foot slipped. His body came away from the rock. He had just enough time to hear himself scream: "No!" And then nothing. Emptiness. Silence. Darkness.

How long had it been before he came to his senses? The night was heavy and enveloped his bloodied body. He tried to move. The pain was so searing that he fainted. And then again. After a moment he struggled to open his eyes. In panic, his eyes trying to comprehend. Am I alive? Am I whole? He couldn't turn his head. He couldn't see anything anyway. The night was pitch black; thick clouds must have covered the moon. Or maybe he was at the bottom of a ravine. Only the taste of blood in his mouth told him he wasn't dead.

Panic. No air. Panic. His heart. Racing. Pain. Groaning. Held in a vice. From his throat to his chest. Where? Alive! In pain. Excruciating. Fear. Of dying. Panic. Pain. Screaming. Mental blackout. Darkness.

When he came to, his heart was pounding against his temples and he could feel the blood still flowing. A terrible migraine gripped his brain, preventing him from thinking. In his head, everything was in turmoil, fear drowning out his mental faculties. Breathe! With superhuman effort, he gradually managed to impose a slower rhythm on his breathing. After a while, a trickle of calm crept into his battered body. Mere scraps. Ulysses took advantage of them to try and think about the urgency of the situation. Stay alive.

Take stock of the situation. Find out which parts of his body were injured. Identify the limbs he could rely on. Adapt his vision to the darkness. Analyse. Think of a solution. A way out. A strategy.

As gently as possible, he was able to move his right arm very slightly. His left arm remained motionless, trapped under his body. He shifted his focus to his legs. As he tried

to rotate his pelvis, he was again seized by an unbearable pain. He quickly understood. Fracture or torn ligament. Both? Where exactly? His spine, his hips, his legs? The pain was so intense below his waist that he couldn't work out which part had been affected. He felt nauseous and vomited onto the stone.

It took him a few more long, deep breaths to swivel his torso a few degrees. He lifted his stunned, weighted head from the blood-reddened stone.

It took him many more minutes to extract his left arm from under his body. It seemed to weigh a tonne. He closed and opened his numb left hand. Stiffened by weight and immobility, its response was delayed. The discrepancy between cerebral command and mechanical execution caused a surge of anxiety.

Breathe.

The rush of blood to his fingers made him scream, the pain banishing his anxiety. For just a moment.

It took him many more moments to slow his racing heartbeat a little. To gather his thoughts. The pain was so acute that he could hardly think. Panting, he leaned with difficulty on his left elbow, avoiding putting too much strain on his forearm and his out-of-sync hand. He could feel the perspiration pouring down his neck. Or was it blood?

Breathe.

His mouth felt as if it was filled with metal. Aloud, as if to convince himself, he told himself: You're going to be okay, mate!

In truth, he wasn't so sure he believed it.

He had to deploy the depths of patience and effort to raise his upper body and lean fully on his left hand. It was like an electric shock, searing, intense, unspeakable. He screamed. The mountain echoed back the intensity of his suffering.

Breathe.

Calm his racing heart.

Breathe.

In the darkness, he identified an imaginary point in front of him on which to focus his blind gaze. Focus.

Breathe.

He managed to catch his breath a little. His more mobile right arm groped the stone in the darkness, looking for clues to where he was. The searching seemed endless, especially as the intense pain throughout his body and the anxiety that made his heart race were now compounded by the night's icy chill. His clothes were damp. He was shivering.

Don't let panic and despair get the better of you. Stay in control. Remember the life-saving gestures. The decisions that save lives.

He was about to give up when his right hand struck a softer, smoother mass. He must have stretched his arm out further because the pain he felt was even more acute and violent, causing him to let out a wild scream, amplified by the echo in the night. He vomited.

The presence of this familiar mass was enough to reduce the anxiety that was crushing his chest by a few degrees. His brain, tormented by a terrible migraine, understood nonetheless. His rucksack! It was his rucksack! So he had landed on the promontory. In the midst of the pain and anguish, not knowing how he would climb back up, this revelation felt like good news. In any desperate situation, every glimmer of improvement, every

window of opportunity, rekindles hope. Hold on to it. Don't let go. Believe that you'll get through this. Choose to believe when all evidence suggests that you should give up.

Painfully, he pulled his rucksack closer. The effort seemed superhuman. It was. His right hand managed to slide the rope from the pocket where his torch was stored. He grabbed it. What appeared in the faint halo of light made him cry out. His left leg lay on the ground, twisted from the knee down to his seemingly lifeless foot. The hideous twist made him feel sick again. He kept his mouth shut. Blood everywhere. He soon realised that there was no arterial damage. No open fractures either. Thank God! Just – the choice of word almost made him smile – deep gashes from which blood was still oozing. He felt his limbs. Confirmation: no fracture. He checked his pelvis, which was sore but unharmed. His arms were also covered with multiple cuts. His T-shirt and shorts were torn. He'd lost a shoe. He leaned a little more on his left arm until his torso was completely straight. He felt reassured. Even if this movement was extremely painful, the fact that he managed to do it meant that his spine was not affected. His hopes grew. But not for long.

He was going to have to correct the external dislocation of his left kneecap. On his own. Here. On this promontory. In the icy night. Without painkillers. He sighed. Before gritting his teeth and encouraging himself aloud. Hang on, mate! You can do it!

He opened the main pocket of his bag. He managed to pull off his T-shirt. A shiver ran down his spine. He was trembling. He realised that the noise he heard was his jaws chattering. As best he could, he wiped himself with his T-shirt before rolling it into a ball and carefully putting on the fleece which, fortunately, was stowed at the very top. The warmth and comfort helped him breathe easier. His anxiety subsided again. Just a little. But not the pain.

He shifted slightly to make sure he was sitting upright. The promontory was narrow. He felt the emptiness sucking him in on his left. Don't make any sudden movements. Don't look down. Just breathe. His leg was causing him excruciating pain. He leaned forward, reaching towards his left knee. How could he straighten out his leg? He'd seen mountain rescue workers do it once or twice. That wasn't enough. He didn't know how to do it himself. Think. With his right hand, he picked up his bloody T-shirt and put it under his calf, a makeshift strap. He lifted his twisted leg as gently as possible. Screamed.

He had to take several minutes to catch his breath. You've got no choice, Ulysses. You're going to have to juggle, but you have no choice. He remembered that he still had a little brandy in a side pocket of his rucksack. With a huge effort, he took out the flask. The alcohol flowed down his throat, into his veins. The feeling of well-being was almost immediate. He breathed a little more calmly. He placed his hands on either side of his inert leg, at either end of his T-shirt-strap. He inhaled deeply and lifted his twisted limb again. He screamed. But he managed to move his leg sideways. Now, if he bent over, he could almost touch his foot. From his bag, he took out his walking stick. He was so pleased to have found this branch a few days earlier, which he had carved at length while watching the sunset. He was going to have to break it down to fit his leg. He thought about it. By hitting the rock, he risked losing one of the two halves and depriving himself of the part that was the most suitable length. He thought again. His leg was throbbing terribly, but the brandy was gradually taking effect. With the knife he had in his pocket, he decided to cut into his stick as deeply as he could. After several long minutes, sweating

profusely despite the cold night air, he decided he could try to break his future splint. He took another deep breath and struck the rock face with a sharp blow as he exhaled. The break was clean. Exactly where the gash had been. Yes! Every victory counts.

He now had to reposition his leg in line. How was he going to do it? He tried to recall the actions of the mountain doctors he had seen treating dislocations when hiking as a teenager with his father, uncle and cousins. His memory was blurred; he was blinded by sweat, paralysed by pain and anguish. You've got no choice, mate, unless you want to die on this cliff! Despite the throbbing throughout his body, he managed to warm up the muscles in his back and stomach by leaning forward and gently straightening up, supporting himself against the rock face, out of breath. After a few moments, the muscle warm-up enabled him to reach his ankle with his hands. He placed his right hand on his left ankle and his left hand on his knee. He inhaled as deeply as he could. His breath accompanied the violent twisting of his knee. His terrible howl shook the mountain and the night. Panting, he looked down at his leg. His knee had moved, but not enough. He had to try again. The second attempt seemed even more difficult than the last. He knew now how much pain this would cause. He took another sip of brandy, did a few more forward bends, inhaled deeply and applied even more force to reposition his knee. His scream did not hide the hideous cracking of his kneecap. He vomited.

After a few moments, he looked at his leg. It was straight. He tore his T-shirt into strips as even as possible. He positioned one part of his stick along his swollen leg and tightened the strips of fabric as much as he could. When he had finished, he leaned on his hands and slid his body a little closer to the rock face. He took his sleeping bag from his bag, covered himself with it and decided to sleep, 200 metres above the void.

He was woken by the cries of the birds of prey circling nearby. An instant shiver ran through his body. He was freezing despite the sleeping bag covering him. His stomach was twisted. His tongue was thick. He tried to wipe the dried blood from his face with his sleeve. His muscles were cold and numb. His leg was sheer pain.

With the light of day, he was able to assess the situation differently. He forced himself to breathe as calmly as possible to contain the pain and anguish. He looked up. Twenty metres. Maybe twenty-five. Beneath him, almost infinity. His first reaction was to think about his ascent. How was he going to do it with his leg immobilised? His mind, although only recently awakened, was racing, looking for a strategy. In vain. You need to get your strength back! Despite the nausea he still felt, he rummaged through his rucksack for a piece of stale bread. and the small piece of sheep's cheese that a shepherd had given him the day before. He was famished. He took a sip of water from his flask, taking care to ration himself. He inhaled deeply.

As he bent over again to warm his body, he spotted a via ferrata a few metres below. A protected climbing route. His brain twitched nervously. Could this be the solution? Not to climb up 20 metres, but to climb down a lot more. And then back up again. Suddenly, the option seemed more attractive. More feasible. He swallowed the last mouthful of bread and took hold of the rope hanging from his bag. He tied it around his waist. To make sure he didn't lose it. Unravelling it completely, he cast it towards the via ferrata, hoping to reach it. The rope was long enough! He brought it towards him and attached one of its hooks to the end. He threw the rope back. Again and again. Without ever

managing to hook onto one of the via ferrata's arches. He was seething. With effort and pain. In a rage, he began to scream, mixing tears with his cries.

You've got no choice, man! You've got to make it! But he couldn't. It wouldn't. His hook, at best, struck the via ferrata in a clash of metal. But it didn't catch hold. Ulysses felt all hope drain away.

He shivered, he raged, he collapsed. Here, on this promontory, above the void, his left leg immobilised and his body bruised. He thought of Astrid. Of Penelope. His parents, his friends. He cursed himself. You really are an idiot! Going off alone, into the mountains. That's the basic rule: never hike alone, never without telling someone where you're going. You're on your own. You'll die alone. Without anyone. Like the idiot you are! Serves you right! He could no longer repress the jerking of his body. His distress. His loathing. He was nothing but suffering.

Yet after a few moments, when he had given vent to his anger and despair, he calmed down. Strangely, he felt more composed and focused. As if his brain and spirit were accessing a new layer of untapped resources. He breathed in and took a fresh look at the via ferrata. He spotted one of the arches a little higher up than the ones he'd been aiming for until then. It formed a much wider loop. Potentially, it would be easier to hook onto. He tried casting his rope again, his arm conveying the movement he had mentally practised. Yes! The hook caught the via ferrata. He gave a sharp tug and the hook caught the hoop. Securely.

Ulysses opened his rucksack. He found his nylon fanny pack and tied it diagonally around his chest and over his shoulder, after attaching his water bottle. He checked that his passport was in it. It was. He slipped in the bread he had left. He tied his bandana over his forehead, at the roots of his blood-stained hair. He also attached his torch. He thought quickly. Anything else? His karabiners, which he slipped onto his belt and partly onto the rope. He would have liked to take more. But he knew that the success of his ascent depended on mobility, already hampered by his injured knee. And on lightness. He couldn't risk carrying too much. Too bad. He would have to make do without the contents of his rucksack, which were already limited. Strangely enough, his heart ached. He had the feeling that he was abandoning everything that linked him to his former life. Apart from his memories.

He double-checked the strength of the grip on the via ferrata and the rope around his waist. He caught himself making the sign of the cross. After taking one last look at the promontory and what he was leaving behind, he threw himself into the void. With a howl.

His body leaned sideways before coming to rest below the via ferrata. He managed to put one hand on one of the iron rings. Then the other. Using the strength of his arms, he pulled himself up until he could safely place his right foot on it. His left leg, stiff and splinted, dangled by his side. His hands sweated and slid over the cold, rusty metal. Slowly, patiently, to the rhythm of his breathing, he climbed up the track. Until he reached the hoop on which his rope was hung. He undid the hook and secured the hold with a karabiner. It took him several tries before he managed to grab a ring higher up. He paused for a few moments to relieve the tension in his arms and wipe his hands. He resumed his climb. Until he reached the top, where the cliff slid horizontally into a wild meadow. On his stomach, his nose in the grass, disregarding the thistles, he let his joy flow. Sobs of freedom shook his body for a long time. He was exhausted.

It took Ulysses another day's walk, his left leg dragging behind him despite the makeshift crutch he had improvised from the branch of a fir tree, to reach a refuge. It was empty. And yet, the presence of a human structure gave him an unexpected feeling of happiness. He welcomed this sign of civilisation with relief. He smiled at the word and his mind flashed back to the Parisian flat, to his friends, Astrid beside him and Penelope at his feet, a few months earlier. For the first time since he'd left, all he wanted was to see them again.

I'm a man now.

In the morning, a shepherd found him lying on a bench inside the refuge, hypothermic.

He now knows that he owes his return to life to this mountain hermit.

Now, as he stands in front of the door to his flat, he hesitates. He takes a deep breath and rings the bell. He hears Penelope barking. And Astrid's cry of surprise. She had understood. She knows.

Ulysses is here. Her man has come back to her.

STORY 2

SURPASSING YOURSELF

Illustration 2: Marie

Leading points

In business, surpassing yourself cannot be seen as a heroic act or an isolated feat. A record, set in a given context, at a specific time, for a particular individual, cannot necessarily be attained again or even extended to the greatest number. A record is not the same as a norm. Profiles with atypical talent, rare and exceptional individuals capable of going beyond the limits usually set for each of us, however inspiring they may be, cannot become the yardstick against which everyone's performance is assessed, measured and rewarded.

So how can a company tackle the issue of surpassing yourself? It is undoubtedly preferable to see it as an art, or even a science, of individual performance in the service of organisational performance. It is up to the organisation to create the conditions for such performance, which can never be guaranteed.

At the Altrad Group, surpassing yourself is part of an approach to creating human value and excellence, whereby we commit, individually and collectively, to developing our skills, knowledge, talents and expertise in a wide range of areas.

Training, talent management programmes, seminars, experience-sharing, clear job descriptions, mentoring, coaching and on-the-job experience are all ways in which we create value in the service of reproducible and strategically designed performance.

It is all about creating the conditions that

- release energy and motivation;
- give everyone, individually and collectively, the means to connect with their resources and acquire new ones;
- encourage collaboration, mutual aid and support;
- allow us to dare, to show initiative and to take measured risks; and
- give meaning to our commitment and our actions.

By setting up skill – and expertise – enhancement programmes, Altrad is helping to build its performance.

- These are designed to encourage our employees to develop
- resilient determination;
- flexibility and adaptability;
- educated unconsciousness.

From an individual point of view, surpassing oneself can be seen as the transition from very good quality to excellence, the central subject of our work in recent years. Interestingly, as the Austrian-American consultant and author Peter Drucker points out, this passage consumes less effort than moving from incompetence to mediocrity.

Five stages – summarised in five questions – can mark out this journey towards excellence:

- What are my personal and interpersonal strengths?
- What is my working style and how is it suited to my role?
- What are my core values and how are they aligned with those of the organisation?
- Where do I fit in and in what work environment can I achieve my full potential?
- What is or should be my involvement in light of the above?

In addition to developing individual professional skills, we need to put in place the conditions for more effective, more efficient collaboration, in the service of sustainable collective performance that is both ambitious and respectful of people's well-being, their health, and their physical and psychological balance.

- What can we celebrate in terms of creating human value?
- What shortcomings and dysfunctions do we need to address to improve the company's performance and reduce some of the risks to which it is exposed, where the human factor is a determining factor?
- Have we set up a system for learning from our mistakes and successes at every level of the organisation?
- Do we support our employees appropriately and effectively to help them give their best? Are the guidelines we give them clear, consistent and meaningful? Are their resources adapted to their objectives? Are we enabling them to make the decisions and take the actions we expect of them?
- What areas need improvement and what should be our priorities?
- In what way is the creation of human value a tool, a state of mind, a methodology, a commitment in terms of
 - attracting,
 - retaining, and
 - the development of our employees?
- How can we create and develop high-performance teams, with what types of profiles, and to create what types of (remarkable) results?

Remember: we adapt more readily to context than to directives. This is what we call player intelligence: the ability to adapt to a given environment. Are we creating a context that supports more informed choices and behaviour, and consequently the excellence of our teams and employees?

A second panel will look at the state of play in terms of developing our people, our collective performance, our needs and the means of meeting them.

Pitch

Marie, an executive in a large company, has recently been promoted and has joined the Management Team. Everything is as it should be in the best of all possible worlds, except that Marie is petrified whenever she has to speak in public. Will she be able to overcome her chronic anxiety? Will her paralysing fear cost her career?

Characters

- Marie
- Anne, HR manager
- Victor, CEO
- Daniel, public speaking consultant

Locations

- A company in Paris
- The consultant's office

She is alone. In the midst of the crowd. Alone with all these people around her. Or rather, facing her. She's alone against the multitude of gazes. Inquisitive. She can feel them. On her. Piercing her. Surrounding her, coming closer and closer until they suffocate her.

Her body shakes with fear, from head to toe. No. It stops her in her tracks. She trembles from the inside. Her mind is reeling. She can no longer think or reflect. Her thoughts race, jostling for position. Nothing reaches her consciousness. Everything is confusion, stupor, anguish. A mental blank. Her mind ambushed, seized by the throat, pinned motionless to the ground by an enemy lurking in the dark.

She can't swallow. Her throat is dry, her breathing so short she wonders if she is actually taking in air. Her ribcage is squeezed in a relentless vice, tightening its grip. She is on the verge of asphyxiation.

Her heart is racing. Her chest is pounding faster and faster. It feels as if it's about to explode. And even worse, an explosion she wouldn't be able to hide. The crowd splattered. With all her incompetence, all her mediocrity.

Moreover, she is convinced that everyone knows. Everyone can see and hear it, sense it. Her cheeks are flushed, her throat is covered in red blotches, her hands are sweating, her voice trembles: it is too high-pitched, in the wrong register, uncontrollable. Her thoughts are elusive, disorganised, escaping any attempt to capture them; her words are hesitant, she is incapable of expressing herself clearly.

She is strangled by fear, it envelops her, grips her, compresses her, crushes her, squashes her. She is reduced to a pulp, exposed, vulnerable. In danger.

She longs to be elsewhere! To flee, to escape, to disappear, become invisible. Never retreating from the darkness. Staying in the shadows, anonymous, private. Where she can find air. Where she can connect with her intelligence. Where menacing glances don't

threaten her, where they can't reach her. Where she knows she's safe. Sheltered. But how do you escape from yourself? How do you escape your own feelings? The battle is lost before it begins. Knowing this only increases her anxiety.

In vain, she tries to regain the control she lost the moment she knew she had to speak. The fear prevails. It controls everything. It's in command, pulling all the strings. She is nothing more than a puppet, forced to surrender to the powerful thrall of her fear. Which is exactly what she refuses to do. By fighting, with all her strength. By struggling. And the more she struggles, the greater the fear, constraining her in its formidable grasp. Like quicksand.

There are only two options left to her: flee or die. She can't run away. So she's going to die. Her heart will fail. From the frenzy of irrepressible beating. Her lungs will collapse. From the lack of oxygen.

She's going to die. That's what will happen. Of shame, of embarrassment, of rage against herself. She curses her inability to free herself from this panic that crucifies her a little more each time. She detests herself. She feels useless, pathetic, out of place. How could she have ever thought she could aspire to such a position? And yet she knows herself. She knows that, for so many years now, every new attempt leaves her paralysed by fear.

Her hand trembles. The paper she's holding shakes uncontrollably. Her mouth is dry. She feels hot. Very hot.

She probably believed for a while that it would go away as she got older. Or at least that it would get better. That she would be able to take control. That, as an adult, she would no longer be so fearful of the gaze of others, of their judgement. That, as she gained experience and expertise, she would feel more legitimate.

Well, sweetheart, you've made a big mistake! Because it's getting worse all the time!

The sinister shadow of her fear never really leaves her. Either she's been scared, or she's currently scared or she will be scared in the future. She is nothing but fear. The more she tries to expel it, to control it, to stifle it, the more it grows. It's an insatiable demon that feeds on every new attempt, every new failure. She's being eaten from the inside out. Like her self-confidence, nibbled away, devoured, now non-existent, nowhere to be found. Lost.

— Today we welcome Marie, who, as you know, has just been appointed to our Management Team as CTO. Marie, I'll let you introduce yourself and share what you've prepared for us. Marie?! It's your turn. Over to you.

Her frightened eyes turn to the face of the person who has spoken to her. Tears well up in her eyes. She feels like a trapped animal. She coughs. She can barely articulate.

— Sorry, I don't feel very well.

— Marie? Are you okay? You're quite pale. Would you like a glass of water?

Quite pale? She feels as if she's on fire. Her legs are about to give way. She feels hot. And cold. She can't tell anymore.

— Excuse me, Victor. Excuse me. I'll be back in a minute.

She awkwardly pushes back her chair. She rushes out. Unsteadily. As fast as her hesitant steps allow. Her hand over her mouth. She could feel all the scornful looks. What a disgrace!

Once locked in the toilet, she lets the tears roll down her cheeks. Her stomach clenches with nausea. A false start. She cries more. She hates herself!

After a few minutes, she hears footsteps then a gentle knocking on the door she's leaning on, breathless.

— Marie? It's Anne. Do you need any help?

She opens the door. Her mascara runs in black streaks down her wet cheeks.

— I'm ... I'm sorry.

— Come with me to my office. Come on.

Anne hands her a tissue.

— It's over. The meeting's finished. You can make your presentation next time.

Instantly, the vice loosens its grip. Air rushes into her lungs, her heart slows down. She regains some composure.

— I've ruined everything! That was a great first impression! I'm so sorry.

— I know you are. Come on. Let's have some tea. Would you like that?

— Thanks, Anne. That's very kind of you. I'd like that, yes. A cup of tea.

Seated in the comfortable armchair in Anne's office in the Human Resources department, Marie relaxes a little. She takes a tissue from the box on the small table to her right and finishes wiping her face.

— Sugar? Milk?

— No, nothing. Just as it is. Thanks, Anne.

— Feeling better?

— Yes, a bit, thanks. I'm terribly sorry. I don't know what came over me.

— You don't know what came over you?

— Actually I do. But ... it's a bit difficult to say.

— Well, take your time.

— It's the meeting.

— The meeting?

— Yes, the management team meeting. My first one.

— The management team meeting. Right, okay. Anything in particular?

— No, nothing special. Except ... I blew it!

— Did anything happen before that?

— No, nothing in particular. Well, yes.

— I don't quite understand, Marie. Can you tell me more?

— I'm afraid that ... If I tell you more, it could be detrimental to me. I'm afraid it could backfire. For my career.

— Okay. I can sense that this is an important issue for you.

— It's more than important. It's terrifying.

— Terrifying?

— Anne, can what I'm about to tell you stay between us?

— It's difficult for me to commit myself in advance. Is it to do with your new job?

— Yes, it is.

— What about it?

— I don't really know where to start ... Okay.

- The thing is ... I'm not sure ... The thing is, I'm afraid of speaking in public!
- Okay.
- That's it! It's as simple as that! And as terrible. I'm terrified. I'm scared. Very scared, in fact.
- Every time?
- Every time.
- No matter the size of the group?
- Yes. I'm as scared of speaking in front of five people as I am in front of twenty. And I can't even imagine having to speak in front of one hundred people. Next month's Town Hall ... I'm having nightmares about it. Every night. It's awful!
- I understand.
- I don't think you do. I'm sorry, Anne. I don't think you understand. I don't think anyone understands, for that matter. I feel like I'm going to die. In fact, I think I'd rather be dead than go through this this horror every single time. I think I understand.
- Honestly, it's incomprehensible! And it's been like this for years! The worst thing is that it's getting worse. The longer it goes on, the more scared I get.
- And the more scared you get, the more scared you are of being scared?
- Exactly!
- Marie, you know that public speaking is one of the most common fears in the workplace, don't you?
- What?!
- Of course it is! The figures vary from one study to another, but in France almost 70 per cent of people say they feel fear or stress before speaking in public.
- Anne, are you serious?
- Yes, I'm serious! And for women the percentage even exceeds 75 per cent. You see, you're far from being alone.
- I never realised that ... Marie, can I tell you something in confidence?
- Yes. Yes, of course.
- I used to be like you. Like me? You mean you used to throw up before your meetings? That you didn't sleep for a week before speaking in public? And afterwards you were angry with yourself, you thought you were a total loser for stammering, for losing your train of thought, for being scared, like a child? That shame. It eats away at you.
- I used to be really scared too.
- And you got over it?
- No. Well, not entirely. But I can handle it now. Better, in any case. Much better.
- Marie remains silent. Puzzled. After a moment, she says:
- I'm beginning to think I should give it all up.
- All what?
- Anne's voice remains calm and kind.
- My job. This promotion. Honestly, how could I have accepted a job like this, where I have to speak in public all the time?
- Because you're qualified for the job.
- Apart from the speaking side ...
- Marie, it doesn't have to be that way.
- Yes, it does. It's inevitable! You can't do anything about it! I've tried everything. Nothing works. Nothing!

The two women pause their conversation, which still seems to be going on in Marie's head. She asks:

— How did you do it?

— I had help.

— Help? From whom?

— A professional.

At this point, Anne senses that Marie's resignation is starting to dwindle. She leaves a long silence, until Marie speaks again.

— Is this professional still working? Could they help me too? To overcome my fear?

— Yes, he could.

— You seem very sure about that. But frankly, I'm a hopeless case!

— Maybe you are. I don't know about that.

— Was it hard?

— I'd be lying if I said it was easy. It took me several weeks. More like a few months. And even now, I sometimes feel uncomfortable, especially when I'm tired, or in front of certain people. Still. But it's nothing like it was before. Night and day!

— I had to train. A lot. Daniel is a consultant who specialises in voice and public speaking, and he was very good. He's a real pro. He's used to dealing with this.

— Even desperate cases?

Marie laughs in spite of herself.

— He's a specialist. Would you like to meet him?

— I don't know ... I'm not sure. I want to, but at the same time I'm afraid I'll be disappointed. Again.

— Okay, then. And if you don't meet him, what do you plan to do?

— Move to the mountains and raise goats!

Marie chuckles. She imagines herself in her tailored suit, milking the goats in the straw. The prospect of a stress-free life is attractive, despite everything. Anne smiles, but says nothing.

— You're right, Anne. I've got no choice. Because if I don't, there's not much chance of Victor continuing supporting me!

— You know what, Marie? Just think about it! And we'll talk again tomorrow. Sound okay to you?

Marie sips her tea. Then she stands up.

— No, it's okay. I've thought it through! I would like to meet Daniel.

— Are you sure? You can take more time to think about it.

— That's exactly what I do. All the time. Too much, in fact. I'm sick of seeing what's going to happen to me in the rear-view mirror! I'm sick of worrying!

— That's the Marie I know! A fighter!

— That's the energy of despair!

Anne gets up and goes behind her desk.

— I'll contact Daniel today. I'll email you once I've spoken to him. Is that okay with you?

— That's fine by me! Thank you, Anne. Thank you so much.

— You're very welcome. That's what I'm here for.

— To take care of the department of tears?

Anne smiles.

— Yes, sometimes. But mostly to help you and the others to grow. Professionally.

— Thank you, Anne. Really.

The following day, Marie gets an email from Anne putting her in touch with Daniel. The company gives her a series of five working sessions with Daniel. Two hours each. All Marie has to do is contact Daniel to arrange a meeting.

The minute she taps the number on her phone, she realises that her hand is shaking. This is ludicrous! I'm even freaking out about a simple phone call! Poor thing, you've really hit rock bottom!

— Daniel? Daniel Legendre? Hi, my name is Marie Liancourt. I'm following up from Anne de Vigny's email. Anne said you might be able to help me.

— Hello. How can I help you?

— I ... I'll be blunt. I'm scared of speaking in public. Anne said you could help me. To be less afraid.

— We could try.

— Okay ... Try ... That won't be enough. It has to work!

— We'll try and make it work.

Marie lets out a sigh. She's no longer entirely sure that Daniel is the right person for her. But she continues.

— So, how does it work in practice? Two-hour sessions, right?

— Yes. Roughly.

— Roughly?

— It depends on the session. But on average, it's two hours.

— Okay. And the sessions take place at the office?

— Not your office. Mine. To begin with.

— At your office? Are you far away? I didn't notice ... No. You're the one who has to come to me.

— Okay. You ... You said "to begin with".

— Yes. We'll meet at my office to start with. After that, it could change.

— Would you come to our offices?

— No. I meant we could go somewhere else. Get out. Get some fresh air.

— Okay. Should I be worried?

— No, no more than you already are. Marie's your first name, isn't it? Can I call you Marie?

— Yes, of course.

— All right, then. You can call me Daniel. When would you like to start?

— As soon as possible!

— I can suggest next week. Thursday. At 4 pm. Does that suit you?

— Thursday? Just a minute ...

Marie checks her diary.

— Yes, that's perfect. Do I need to prepare anything?

— No, nothing.

— Nothing?

— I think you're all set. See you on Thursday. I'll confirm everything by e-mail.

— Thank you very much. See you on Thursday, then. Have a good day.

If she is perfectly honest with herself, she has to admit that ever since her conversation with Daniel, Marie has felt nothing but mounting anxiety. The idea of having to talk to someone she doesn't know about something so personal and shameful. And on top of that, this business about going out. What does he expect her to do? Just thinking about it makes her heart race and her hands sweat. And as always, she blames herself for being so vulnerable. It's so childish, this uncontrollable fear! Grow up! Her injunctions, which she gives herself with violence and contempt, have no effect. Her fear doesn't let up.

When she arrives at Daniel's office, she's in a sweat. Her twisting stomach has made her nauseous. She shudders but rings the bell.

She is rather surprised when Daniel opens the door. By the sound of his voice, she was expecting a tall, confident man of around fifty. Instead, she is greeted by an elderly man with white hair, leaning on a cane.

— Hello Marie. Did you find it all right?

— Hello ... I ... I hadn't imagined you like this at all!

Marie is surprised at her own directness! What's she saying here?

— I get that a lot! replies Daniel, amused. It's my voice. It doesn't reflect my age!

— Sorry, you must think I'm very rude.

— In this case, rather spontaneous. Which tells us something: when you're surprised, you dare to say things. That's good news, isn't it?

Is that good news? She instantly remembers her mother's advice: "Think before you speak."

— If you say so. I was brought up a bit differently.

— Just goes to show that we can learn and unlearn.

And now, in just a few seconds, this old man with the smiling eyes has already stirred something inside her. She follows him down the long corridor to a brightly lit room lined with books. She automatically moves over to the bookcase and starts looking at the titles and authors.

— If a book interests you, you can borrow it. I'll just ask you to be kind enough to bring it back to me when you've finished it.

— Okay, thanks. I don't know ... I was just looking. I don't recognise any of your books.

— Second piece of good news: you still have things to discover! This session is definitely off to an excellent start!

— If you say so. Where should I sit? Over there, in that chair?

— No, not that one. That's mine. The other one, opposite. Please sit down.

With a sweep of his hand, Daniel invites Marie to take a seat opposite him.

— So, if you don't mind, I'd like you to tell me how I can help you?

Marie's face instantly flushes. In a quavering voice, she says:

— As I told you on the phone, I have trouble speaking in public. A lot of trouble. Even now! Massive stage fright that ... that completely destabilises me. I'm scared to death. My career is at stake!

The silence she leaves for Daniel hangs in the air. He smiles and remains silent.

— So, Anne, Anne de Vigny whom I think you know, advised me to meet you. She told me that you had helped her.

Silence.

— I'd like you to help me too.

— How will you know I've helped you?

— If I'm no longer afraid to speak in public! That seems obvious!

— Sometimes the goal becomes the obstacle.

— What? I don't understand. I just don't get it. I'm sorry, what you're saying isn't at all clear to me.

— I'll try to put it differently: sometimes the goal becomes the obstacle.

— That's exactly what you just said!

— You're right. Now that you've heard this sentence a second time, what do you make of it?

Marie readjusts her position in her seat. She thinks that the session is likely to drag if he carries on this little game. But she turns the phrase over.

— Maybe what you're saying is that it's not being afraid any more that's blocking me.

— Absolutely!

— So?

— Let's recognise that what wouldn't be normal is to not be afraid at all when faced with people you don't know and whose intentions you're not sure of. Don't you think so?

— Perhaps, yes. But so what?

— So, fear is neither abnormal nor your enemy. It protects you.

— Not in my case, it doesn't! If this goes on, I'll be fired!

— That is a possibility, yes.

— Well, thank you! That's really reassuring.

— I suppose it is, since you and I have now named the worst thing that could happen to you if your fear continued to be excessive and rule your life: losing your job. You'd find another one.

— Maybe not! I doubt my problem will remain confidential. The more you focus on not being afraid, the more connected you are to your fear. It's a bit like a radio, if you'll forgive a slightly dated metaphor. Do you remember radios?

Marie nods. Daniel continues.

— A radio picks up a wavelength. When you're on that frequency, you hear the programme being broadcast. Only that one. Are you following me?

— So far, yes.

— Perfect! When you tune your brain to the "fear" frequency: I'm afraid, I'm going to be afraid, I've been afraid, I'm afraid of being afraid, I could be afraid, I don't want to be afraid any more ... in short, when you choose Fear Radio what you hear is Fear Radio. Nothing else.

— I see what you mean. And how do I change the station?

Daniel smiles.

— You choose another one!

— Is there such a thing as "Radio Confidence"?

— There can be. Tell me, Marie. What would happen if, from now on, you could wave your magic wand and speak in public without being afraid?

— That's not going to happen!

— Okay, but what if, thanks to the magic wand, it did. You're in a meeting, in front of ten or twenty people, and you're not afraid. What would happen? Can you describe the scene for me?

Marie sighs but answers anyway

— Well, I'd be clear, intelligent, smiling, funny. My ideas would flow, I'd be relaxed, satisfied, proud of myself ... amongst other things.

— Amongst other things?

— Yes, that's not bad for a start!

— Yes, it's not too bad, admits Daniel. And if you could do everything you've just described, to sum up: speak concisely, to the point, with humour and intelligence, would you be satisfied?

— Well, yes! That's exactly what I've just said!

— Well, not quite. Let me point out the nuance. You've talked about how you want to be. I'm telling you what you could do.

— It's the same thing, isn't it?

— Being and doing? I don't think so.

— I suggest you think about this: acting "as if" is already doing. If you act as if you were speaking with ease, as if you were using humour, as if you were smiling, as if ... then you are doing. Are you ready to give it a try?

Marie hesitates. It all seems a little too simple. Nevertheless, as the session continues, she gradually feels some of her resistance slipping away. She is very touched when Daniel tells her that, in her place, given her goal of perfect eloquence and irreproachability, and also how she saw herself: that she was incapable, that she had never been capable, and all the other negative assessments that she had shared with him, in short, Daniel, in her place, in such conditions, would also be afraid to speak in public.

For the time being, he suggests altering the goal just a little, without changing her ambition to speak, in time, with ease and relevance. The next time she had to speak in front of other people, he asked her to assess the quality of her performance against a single criterion.

— For example you say to yourself: this time, I'll be satisfied if I was smiling during my speech. And when you've finished speaking, you judge its quality on just this criterion. You can start again several times and when you're satisfied with yourself and your ability to smile, you take another criterion, for example, your ability to look at your audience and to move your gaze around so as to sweep your entire audience. Does that sound feasible?

— I can try, yes.

— Perfect! Then we'll do as we said! Would you like to make another appointment?

Marie saw Daniel five times in all. With each visit, she felt her fear diminish. Surprisingly, while Daniel reminded her that the aim was not for the fear to disappear, but rather for it to stop paralysing her and preventing her from doing what she had to do, Marie noticed that the fear no longer took centre stage.

Both studious and motivated, between each session she had got into the habit of recalling Daniel's words, which she knew to be reassuring – she had even written some of them on Post-its and stuck them to her bathroom mirror – and of regularly repeating the exercises he gave her to do. One of the exercises she particularly enjoyed was preparing her speech to the Management Team and practising, in front of her mirror, imitating the celebrities she admired: politicians, actors, comedians and so on.

Or she had to say her text in a certain emotional register, exaggerating each feeling in turn, until she was saying it “normally”. Surprisingly, and this was a paradox she was still struggling to explain, the more she exaggerated her fear, the more it diminished. Daniel had told her that we usually try to fight our fear by trying to silence it. He said that the more you restrain it, the more it shouts out. He had suggested she do exactly the opposite. Welcome it!

Marie could hardly conceal her surprise and ... her concern!

— Daniel had told her that you can calm fear by turning it into courage. And to do that, you have no choice but to go through it.

So Marie trained herself. With diligence, with discipline, with courage, tirelessly repeating all the exercises. She started giving her speeches in front of the mirror. At first, she couldn't bear the sight of herself stammering. But gradually, the flow of her words became more regular, more natural, more fluid.

Daniel had encouraged her to prepare her speeches thoroughly, telling her: You don't have to learn them by heart. Write them down, structure them and repeat them. Ten times, twenty, fifty times if you have to. Until your point is so familiar, your arguments so sharp, that you can say what you have to say even while you're cooking!

— But I have to stay focused! retorted Marie.

— Absolutely! But not on yourself or on what you're saying. That's when you're preparing, when you have to pay attention to your voice and what you're saying. But when you're speaking in front of the members of your team or the Management Team, you have to focus on them. The more available you are to them, the more relevant your response will be.

So Marie followed the instructions again and again. On several occasions she had the impression that she wasn't moving forward, that she was treading water, that she wasn't making any progress. Worse still! Sometimes, it seemed, she was even more afraid than before. Daniel was sympathetic but insistent:

— Don't be discouraged, Marie. No progress, no learning, is ever linear. Take a step back. Your progress curve is undeniable. Don't get lost in the minor ups and downs. Keep on training.

— I want to, but ... But what?

— You can't hide your true nature. It comes out in the end. says Marie, half amused, half discouraged.

— If we're talking about being natural, I prefer the expression: “Nothing becomes natural without training.”

When she arrived for their fifth session, Daniel opened the door, wearing his coat.

— Are you going out? asked Marie, amused at the sight.

— We are.

— We are? And where are we going?

— We're going to take the metro.

Instantly, Marie felt her stomach churn. He was going to ask her to speak in the metro. She immediately felt like throwing up. It was as if the last few weeks of training had vanished into thin air, all for nothing. She was furious and wanted to cry.

— Don't worry! I'm not going to ask you to stir up the crowds, so to speak.

She had to admit that she immediately felt reassured and followed him, albeit with lingering apprehension. But as Daniel had taught her, she didn't try to banish it. On the contrary, she not only welcomed it, but tried to make it grow inside her. After a few seconds, a minute at the most, her heart rate was back to normal.

They arrived at Châtelet metro station. In the corridors, a group of Italian musicians were playing. Daniel knew how dear Italy was to Marie's heart, having spent every summer there since she was a little girl. They joined the crowd listening to the music. After a few moments, the musicians sang "Se bastasse una canzone". Imperceptibly, Marie began to hum along and, without even realising it, sang along with the singer who had approached her, delighted to find such a pretty voice to accompany him in the crowd of onlookers.

The musicians formed a circle around Marie who, encouraged by the singer's gaze, began to sing louder, until she was singing on her own.

When the applause broke out, she felt herself blush. The singer thanked her warmly, before starting a new song.

Behind her, Daniel was smiling. Marie smiled back at him in a way she hadn't for a long time. It was the smile of a victory she'd given up hope of ever finding. But now, in a metro station corridor, it had taken the form of an Italian song.



STORY 3

ALTRAD: SURPASSING ITSELF IN TERMS OF ITS CSR APPROACH

Illustration 3: Antoine, Fred, Paula and their ideals

Leading points

For a company, surpassing itself, both collectively and organisationally, can involve several aspects of its activity.

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), also known as corporate social and environmental responsibility, was coined in 1953 by the American economist and academic Howard Bowen.

Defined today by the European Commission as “the voluntary integration by companies of social and environmental concerns into their business activities and their relations with stakeholders”, CSR is the contribution companies make to the challenges of sustainable development. By implementing these practices, a company aims to have a positive impact on society, while remaining economically sustainable.

CSR is governed by a series of laws and agreements that have marked the development of this ethical approach (see the diagram on the next page).

Specifically, under the terms of the ISO 26000 standard, the scope of CSR is based on seven central themes:

- Corporate governance
- Human rights
- Labour relations and working conditions
- Environment
- Fair practices
- Consumer issues
- Communities and local development

CSR in ten dates



Based on a core set of values (conviviality, courage, humility, respect, solidarity) that shapes Altrad's organisational culture and underpins our strategy, our CSR approach is seen as a process of continuous improvement in all these areas. We call this the creation of societal value. The *raison d'être* that we have established for ourselves invites and obliges us to go further.

Together, our values, CSR approach and *raison d'être* define an ambitious, global ethical framework. Individually and collectively, for the Group this ongoing progress can be understood as surpassing ourselves ethically.

- How can we promote uniform behaviour and best practices within the Group while taking into account the realities and cultures of the countries where Altrad operates?
- How can we guarantee compliance with laws and regulations, both nationally and internationally?
- How can we prevent and combat corruption and illicit practices?
- How can we contribute to the development of social rights in all our subsidiaries?
- How can we make a positive contribution to the development of society?
- How can we ensure that our growth is based on sustainable development, respect for the environment and the preservation of life?

How far have we come? How far do we still have to go? Our efforts and the progress we have made in recent years deserve to be celebrated, encouraged and continued. Is it still urgent, or necessary, for the Altrad Group to surpass itself in terms of CSR? We believe so, particularly given the importance of the issues at stake.

This event is an opportunity to discuss the creation of societal value and the strategies we can implement or improve in order to collectively continue to surpass ourselves in terms of CSR.

Pitch

Fred and Paula, newly qualified research engineers, are leaving Europe for Africa to join WaterAccess Inc., a company specialising in access to drinking water run by Antoine Grandjean, a former humanitarian aid worker. Filled with ideals, eager to change the world, to make it more ethical, fairer and equal, they plan to put their expertise at the service of the routing and natural treatment of surface water to meet the domestic and agricultural needs of local populations. From dream to reality, will they succeed in adapting to this new environment, overcoming their habits, prejudices and fears? What contribution can they make to a company that is constantly striving to create more CSR value?

Characters

- Fred, a young engineer, Paula's partner
- Paula, a young engineer, Fred's partner
- Antoine, CEO of WaterAccess Inc.
- Dembo, a WA employee

Location

- An industrial site somewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa

Carried by the trade winds, humid air rises and brings moisture to the land. It has to gain altitude and be cooled before the humidity is released in the form of precipitation, at the equator and on its tropical fringes, flooding the dense forests, teeming with all forms of life. Fauna and flora thrive in this environment; the species are plentiful, and the possibilities abound alongside the threats.

There are places, here and there, where the rain will never touch the sand and stones, which, under the burning sun, continue to radiate their mineral fire. The dry air blows unabated across the deserts and arid plains, covering the heathlands in deadly drought. The open forests and savannahs have gradually given way to a hostile, monochromatic world where life has to deploy a wealth of ingenuity if it is to exist at all.

This vast continent, stretching south from the shores of the Mediterranean, seems to cleave the ocean with the Horn of Africa, dividing it into an Atlantic side and an Indian side. Arid land accounts for more than 60 per cent of the total surface area. It is surrounded by salt water, fresh water flows in abundant, as yet unexploited, underground aquifers, yet water is still in short supply. Cruelly so. Or rather, it's the uneven distribution and extreme dependence on rainfall that makes the lives of its people so precarious. And yet it is potentially so fertile. It is not the amount of water that's at issue, but its variability and, consequently, the capacity to use it in the right place at the right time. A real challenge. One that is now shared by a growing number of people around the world.

It is surprising to see how fragile the rivers are, given that the continent is criss-crossed by raging water courses that flow into the sea, in some places tumbling down in monumental cascades. Thunderstorms roar louder here than anywhere else.

Fred knows this. Water issues have a major impact on human development. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, water stress and the lack of sufficient quality water to meet human and environmental needs have a major impact on food security and health. He is surprised that irrigation is only extensively employed in Egypt. Is he being naïve in thinking that all it would take would be to dig canals here and everywhere, in a reasoned and strategic way, to harness the floods?

Water. Again. It is also at stake in border disputes, at the root of political ascendancy and as the focus of so many humanitarian commitments.

Water. The core subject of his 1,200-page thesis, "Towards modernised water management: Wealth, poverty and corruption. A continent thirsting for progress". And it earned him an honourable mention.

Water. It was his whole life. It occupies his thoughts, his research, his lively discussions and his political commitment. It is also why he didn't hesitate when he was approached outside the lecture hall. The ink was barely dry on his thesis when he was already flying off thousands of kilometres from home, his luggage containing all the enthusiasm of those who want to share their discoveries and knowledge with the world. The beauty of youth is their unwavering faith. The endearing thing is their ability throw their energy into what they believe in. They have no doubts about their dreams.

Of course he hadn't hesitated. But he had to admit it to himself, having Paula by his side had clinched it. An engineer like himself, she made no secret of her love of travel, her taste for adventure and thirst for justice. An idealist? She was the first to admit it. What's more, she claimed it as a badge of honour that others would have hidden on the

back of their lapel. Passionate about biodiversity, she had concentrated her research on studying the sensitivity of territories – and the animal and plant species they contain – to organic pollution of ground and surface water: new species, mutant species, endangered species, life in all its forms stirred an insatiable curiosity in this bright young woman. It gave her the pretext to launch violent diatribes against all the companies and laboratories that she accused of crimes against life. Sometimes at the risk of making her audience feel uncomfortable, even a little attacked. Nobody likes to be blamed.

Arriving at the airport, Fred and Paula are stunned by the heat. It's January and the thermometer is around 35 degrees Celsius! What a change from Paris! Getting off the plane, guided by the flight attendant onto the tarmac, which seemed to be evaporating, they feel as if they've hit a wall of hot air. And humidity. Their shirts are instantly saturated. Paula struggles to catch her breath. She hadn't expected this. Behind the windows of their school's huge library, in the pages of books and on video screens, this country doesn't grab you quite like it does when you set foot on its soil, by the stomach, the throat and the heart. And the fatigue of the journey probably doesn't help either.

Further along, next to the stairs where the passengers continue to descend, a man dressed in a sand-coloured shirt and trousers stands next to a Jeep, holding a sign with both their names on it. When they approach him, without removing his glasses, he immediately reaches out to grab their hand luggage.

— Hello. I'm Dembo. Mr Grandjean couldn't come to meet you. He's waiting for you at the plant.

— Right away?! exclaims Paula.

— I'll take you to the hotel first to drop off your things, replied Dembo.

— What about our suitcases? asks Fred

— We'll take care of that, Mr Fred. You'll find them at the hotel.

— And our passports? Isn't anyone checking our passports? worries Paula.

— Everything's in order, Miss Paule.

— Paula. Not Paule. Thank you. Who's checking our passports? Aren't we going through customs? Or security?

— Mr Grandjean took care of everything. He told the airport you were coming. They're used to it.

— But this is outrageous! It's a privilege! We could be anyone. Fred, say something!

Dembo, surprised by the young woman's violent reaction, waits before starting the car. Fred gestures that he can start.

— You've got to be kidding me! Are you okay with this?!

— Paula, I sent a copy of our passports to WaterAccess and filled in the police and customs forms a few days ago. They've got everything!

— They have? And the other passengers? Didn't they fill in the paperwork?

— I don't know about them. I just know that for us, the formalities are in order. That's what the secretary general of WaterAccess told me.

— So you knew we were going to avoid the controls?

— You can't escape the controls. Everything has already been checked.

— But us, our faces. Nobody checked us!

— It always happens like that, Miss Paule, says Dembo.

— Paula! she corrects immediately, brimming with indignation. And adds: Well, that's terrible. I find it lamentable. And scandalous!

In the rear-view mirror, Dembo looks surprised. Then, with a smile, he adds philosophically:

— You'll get used to it, Miss Paula. "The egg doesn't dance with the stone", as we say here.

Fred looks at his partner and gestures for her to calm down. She buries her face in a handkerchief. As much to wipe away the sweat beading on her face as to find a more familiar scent. And to try and soothe the overwhelming emotions that are whizzing throughout her body. She feels swamped. And she's only been here a few minutes.

Fred squeezes her hand. He knows how impulsive Paula is. In fact, that's what he likes so much about her. Her whole-heartedness, her unfailing integrity, her ability to speak to everyone as equals, without worrying about titles, ranks or other trappings of power. Or the consequences. And she has often paid the price for it. She doesn't care about hierarchy: she doesn't compromise on truth, logic, intelligence or honesty. Politics? Not for her! She hates politics.

She and Fred have talked about it many times, especially since their decision to move abroad. About the fact that you have to take into account the context, the people, the cultures, the history. He points out the advantages of compromise. For her, Fred's relativism is just a way of accepting compromise. She expects a pure and absolute code of honour. When he criticises her uncompromising attitude, she loses her temper.

— So you think it's okay to sell out to the enemy? To flout your most basic principles? Playing along with a rotten system?

— I'm just trying to qualify what you're saying, Paula. I admire your conviction, but don't you think you're exaggerating a bit?

— Exaggerating? But it's precisely because the world is full of people who compromise their values that we're heading straight for the wall!

— I'm not talking about making concessions! I'm talking about compromise. It's not the same thing.

— It is for me! Compromise? The rot has already set in! It's too late!

Sometimes Paula's radicalism worried him.

— Do you realise that not everyone has the same outlook on life? And that where we go, other rules apply? Are you sure you can get used to this? To these differences?

— That's kind of why we're going, isn't it? To get a message across. To make people understand that stupid decisions, suicidal behaviour and dubious practices are a recipe for disaster. For all of us. Over there, just like here. We're no better off. Quite the contrary, in fact.

— And you really think that at twenty-five and armed with our qualifications, we're going to change all that? sighs Fred, a little ironically.

— And our conviction! You're forgetting our conviction, the will of the people, she adds, raising her fist as if she were leading a troop through the barricades. Fred, where's your fire? If we don't believe in it, then who will?

— It's not that, and you know it, he replies, slightly offended that she should question the force of his commitment. It's the method. I'm not sure that upending the table is the best option.

— Tabula rasa! Clean sheet! That's all there is to it. "No freedom for the enemies of freedom!" Fred hesitates to pick up on the paradox of the slogan. Sometimes he just evades the issue. So he kisses her.

Now that they're sitting in the back of the jeep, sweaty and exhausted, he wonders if they should have come at all. He watches Paula doze off, her hand clasped in his. It's not often you see her weakened. Really. Something in her was struck as soon as she got off the plane. He's never seen her give up so quickly. Fatigue? The unknown coming down on them with all the force of the present? He feels a little unsettled too. He takes a deep breath. I'll feel better after a good shower. When they're rested and can see more clearly. Meanwhile, through the jeep's dusty window, he watches the red earth passing by.

As soon as they arrive at the plant, Fred and Paula are taken to Antoine's office.

He gives them information about the background and development of the company.

— WaterAccess Inc. has grown steadily since it was founded and set up in Sub-Saharan Africa. Its activities have become increasingly diversified in terms of staff and expertise. Originally conceived as an NGO, it has gradually developed into a commercial enterprise. Its mission is still to provide access to drinking water for as many people as possible, thanks to innovative processes whose negative environmental impact is constantly being reduced. "Clear water with clean technologies." Today, the company continues to work with major international organisations on issues surrounding access to water, sanitation and hygiene, but it has also developed a supporting business for wastewater collection and treatment. This entails manufacturing sophisticated collectors and installing wastewater treatment plants, which altogether treat millions and millions of litres of water for domestic and industrial purposes, before being discharged into the natural environment. We're very proud of this achievement, even if there's still a lot to do. At every level. We're taking it one step at a time. Baby steps, even. But we're making progress! More recently, to sustain our efforts and development, the company decided to expand the team at its applied research centre. Open up new avenues. Be more biocompatible. Use less energy and fewer processed materials. Be more ethical, in other words. Not just by treating water, but by providing it, making it available. Improved containment. And that's where you come in!

Antoine Grandjean, white shirt slightly open at the neck and navy blue trousers rolled up over his tanned ankles, retells the story. As if he still has to convince them to join him in this venture whose success is a bit beyond him. Judging by his face, and by the energy he radiates, Fred can see the man's tremendous enthusiasm, but perhaps also a certain fatigue. Though the latter vanishes as soon as he starts talking.

— Welcome to you both! I'm delighted to have you on the team. You'll see: it's easy to fall in love with this country, this continent.

Paula doesn't hold back a moment longer, eager to get down to business.

— I have to say that I was particularly shocked at the airport. Why didn't we go through customs like everyone else? Frankly, I think that for a mission-driven organisation, you're not being very consistent!

Fred hadn't expected Paula to wade straight in like that. Antoine was also surprised by her tone and the tirade.

— Would you rather have queued for several hours in the heat and humidity?

— Yes, I would. I would have preferred to be treated like everyone else.

— Right. I'll remember that for next time, replies Antoine, in a light-hearted joking tone.

— You're not answering me! Why weren't we treated like everyone else?

— It so happens that at the time your plane landed, very few customs officers were present. This was due to a strike that has been going on for two weeks, which is having a major impact on the number of staff available. In addition to endemic absenteeism. The authorities have therefore introduced a system of pre-clearance, admittedly reserved for NGOs and certain large companies, to prevent travellers from being stuck at the airport indefinitely. This avoids discomfort, irritation and police intervention. At present, barely a third of travellers wait at the airport. You were part of the majority.

Paula instantly regrets her outburst. She would have insisted on having the last word, repeating the non-negotiability of the essentials, her values, but she realised that it would be counterproductive.

— I'm sorry, she says. I think my tiredness has let the idealist in me get carried away. Thank you for your explanation.

— You're very welcome. When I arrived, I was like you. Shocked by a thousand and one things that weren't working the way I thought they should. And then, after a while, you learn.

— Resign yourself?

— No. It's not resignation. Rather a form of acceptance and understanding. And a different frame of reference. We are not in Europe. Our models are not always appropriate. And we never have access to the whole story. Information is always partial.

— I'm telling you right now, I'm not about to give up my values!

— Nobody's asking you to, Paula. In fact, that's why you're here. For your assertive worldview and your activism. And for your knowledge of bacterial treatment of wastewater containing organic pollutants. Your commitment to biodiversity. That's what interests us about you. We need people like you, people who are passionate about finding innovative solutions for natural treatment.

— Doesn't it bother you that you're making a trade-off with equality?

Fred wonders where this conversation is leading. Without losing his composure, Antoine replies:

— Our values, the values of WaterAccess, are what hold everything together. That's why we're here, advancing a cause we feel very strongly about. Is everything perfect? Of course not. It never is. But I can assure you that we work every day to improve everything that comes within our sphere of influence. What you call trade-offs, I call intermediate steps. But believe me, I'm not losing sight of the objective.

Paula's calmness is not lost on Fred, to whom Antoine now turns.

— Fred, I'm delighted to have you with us too. I'm going to introduce you to the team in charge of exploring which areas are the best candidates for hosting irrigation canals. You'll see. It's not just a question of geography or the processes that cause and maintain certain disorders or diseases. I know you've done a lot of work on river blindness. There are many other aspects, especially political and traditional customs. They'll take you out into the field tomorrow to meet some of the tribal chiefs. You'll get a better understanding.

Paula opens her eyes wide. They'll be separated as early as tomorrow! She hadn't expected that.

— Dembo will take you to your flat tomorrow. Several WaterAccess employees live in the complex. You'll see, it's really nice! There are still a few finishing touches to be made to the paintwork. Tonight, you'll be staying in a hotel. I'll let you get your bearings. The research team meeting is on Thursday morning. See you then.

Their first few weeks on African soil were as exotic as they were exciting and exhausting. Getting used to the heat, and especially the record levels of humidity, takes time. Conforming to working hours wasn't easy either, especially for people whose main work experience up until then had been as research students. Not to mention the change of food, the size of the insects, the multiple delays in the handover of their flat, then their furniture, the power cuts, the faltering internet. Fortunately, their work colleagues had been extremely kind. The help of Dembo, never short of solutions, never ceased to transform their daily lives for the better.

However, in their exchanges with their respective families, they sometimes found themselves sharing doubts and weariness. Suddenly, what seemed accessible from Europe had become insurmountable, unattainable.

— Paula, are you happy to be here?

— Yes, of course I am. Why are you asking me?

— Just to know, that's all.

— Are you happy?

— Well, I am. But I'm also a bit discouraged. I thought things would go faster. Everything takes time. It's exhausting!

— I agree with you there! Did I tell you about the latest one?

— What happened?

And Paula shares what she considers to be the most recent aberrations in terms of functioning, lack of efficiency, obsolete methodology, bureaucratic weight.

— They haven't got the best from French administration, that's for sure! she concludes, ironically.

— Paula, there's something I'd like to talk to you about. But I don't know where to start ...

— What? Is everything okay?

— I'm not sure. I'm wondering.

Paula sits down facing Fred, curious. She pours herself a glass of water. Despite the late hour, it's still stiflingly hot in their flat, the air stirred by a huge ceiling fan.

— I'm all ears. What's on your mind?

— You remember, the first week, just after we arrived, I went with some of the team to visit some tribes to talk about building canals and reservoirs near their villages.

— You bet! I haven't forgotten that you abandoned me as soon as we got here!

— I know, I'm sorry. In fact ... I, I think WaterAccess is paying bribes. To a lot of people.

— What?! You've got to be kidding me.

— I'm afraid not, admits Fred.

— Hold on! What you're saying is really serious! This can't be right! WA is a company with a mission. And integrity is one of their values. They've built their entire reputation on it. People come to them because of that integrity. It's thanks to their impeccable management that they get EU funding. Fred, are you sure about this?

- I think so. Yes.
- Have you talked to Antoine about it? Does he know?
- No.
- No what? You didn't tell him or he doesn't know?
- I haven't told him. I don't know what to do. And I don't know if he knows, if he's involved ...
- Shit ... So much for integrity and transparency! What you're telling me is insane!
- Don't get upset.
- No, but wait! This is really serious! I'm not staying another day in a company that greases the palms of guys who get rich at the expense of other organisations and local populations. No way!
- Fred gets up and goes to the window. Downstairs, a band is playing. He hears laughter and incomprehensible snatches of lively, happy conversation. His heart sinks. He doesn't want to leave. But he has mixed feelings.
- What are you going to do, Fred? asks Paula. We can't just sit here and do nothing. Do you have proof?
- A bundle of evidence, rather. That's another reason why I'm hesitating. I'm not 100 per cent sure.
- How sure are you?
- Well, I don't know. But everything fits. Weird documents, conversations, behaviour ...
- Paula is thinking. She's in a state of shock. And also a bit upset that he hadn't said anything to her until now.
- It's not just that ...
- What?! Have you found out something else? She's stunned.
- Yes, I have. I think that certain studies have been, well, not falsified, well, not completely, but modified. That's a euphemism. To get accepted.
- What! It's getting worse by the minute! What studies? Which department?
- I don't have access to all the research studies. Only the ones that concern my department and those we work with on a daily basis. I came across a report. Just by chance. I wasn't supposed to be copied on the email. It's probably a mistake because shortly after I received it, it was called back. But I'd already downloaded the attachment.
- It's like something out of a film! I can't believe it! And what was in this report?
- It's something that was prepared to obtain EU funding. The topographical routes, the location of the villages, the flow rates of the rivers ... none of it fits with the data I'm working on.
- Are you sure of your sources?
- Yes, totally. My data is correct. I'm certain of that. And I've been out in the field. But the data in the report is not the same.
- And that changes what?
- It changes everything! Only certain tribes would benefit from the planned developments. In fact, it amounts to concentrating the funding on a few tribes while abandoning the populations that the EU believes it is supporting. Hence the bribes. A large proportion of minority ethnic groups would be completely excluded from the development and irrigation programme. Which means that their condition would deteriorate. Food insecurity, famine even, infectious diseases. It's a time bomb. A humanitarian disaster in the making. And, in a nutshell, WaterAccess is watching it happen.

— Fred, you've got to tell Antoine! You can't keep this to yourself! You can't let something like this happen!

— I know. But I'm scared. The financial stakes are enormous. I'm twenty-five, Paula. We're barely twenty-five! And we've only just arrived!

— You're scared? For your safety?

— Yes.

— Aren't you exaggerating a bit?

— No, I'm not. Frankly, I'm afraid.

— Fred, you need to talk to Antoine. He's a good guy. I mean it. You remember, the day we arrived. He convinced me. His values aren't just for show. He's real.

— I think so too. But just imagine: I go to see him and not only does he already know, but he's the head of the thing. Then what do I do?

— Don't you want to talk to Kouassi? Maybe you should start with your manager.

— That's the problem. I think Kouassi's in on it.

— No. What about Baptiste, the financial director? Have you seen him?

— I think he's in on it too.

— But this is like the *French Connection*! It's rotten to the core! Fred, what do we do?

— I'll think about it some more. I've been turning this thing over and over for days. I'll go and talk to Antoine. I've booked our plane tickets anyway. Just in case.

— This is madness! Okay, I'll pack a bag.

— Thanks. Thank you so much.

Fred is breathing freely again. He's hardly slept all night. Now that he has let go, he realises how tense his muscles are and how sweaty his hands are. His jaw aches. His back hurts from all the tension. His stomach is in a knot. But he can breathe.

Antoine continues:

— I'm really impressed, Fred. By your courage. It takes a lot of courage to be a whistleblower. For someone so young, no, really, it's impressive.

Fred accepts the compliment. He didn't really feel brave, given how scared he had been until Antoine thanked him.

Antoine stands up, walks up and down his office, the light streaming through the shutters, and continues:

— My doubts have been growing for some time. Or, should I say confirmed. When WaterAccess was still in NGO mode, we had problems with misappropriation of equipment, small sums of cash and supplies. Not much, but still. Personally, I was shocked in principle. But I was told that there was a margin of tolerance. That this was what greased the machine. And that, on the whole, things were clean. I trusted that. I did ask Vincent, the former CFO (Baptiste's boss before he took over) to manage the petty cash himself and to keep me informed if he had any doubts. At first, he did this scrupulously. Then we started growing, fast. So did the cash amounts. He still gave me the reports, but ... some things didn't quite add up.

— What did you do?

Suddenly Fred realises how accusatory his simple question might sound.

— I fired Vincent. But obviously that wasn't enough. Baptiste probably knew more than I thought. I trusted him. Of course I did! That's one of our values. I was wrong. Simple as that!

— What are you going to do now?

— Clean up! We'd already started, before you and Paula arrived. But these things are tricky. They take time. Clearly, we need to move up a gear. And above all, we're going to have to address the problem of embezzlement and corruption in a much more systemic way than we've done so far. We need to set up a task force. With people we can trust. And identify everything we can do to minimise the risks.

The ensuing silence was broken by the buzzing of a large black insect banging against the walls and the noise of the factory machinery below, filtering through the open window, past the louvered shutters.

— Fred, would you like to join us?

— Thanks for the offer, Antoine. But to be honest, it's not my area of expertise at all. I don't know anything about it!

— I need people I can trust, like I said. And I can trust you. I also need people who think things through and are creative. Which you are too. Take some time to think about it. Can we talk about it again tomorrow? We need to move forward without rushing, but quickly and methodically. Sound alright to you?

— Okay. See you tomorrow then.

Paula and Fred had never imagined when they accepted the WaterAccess offer that their African experience would take the turn it did after Fred and Antoine's conversation. In addition to their historic roles, they were now involved in the task force that had been dubbed "Clean WA".

Several areas were identified and outlined to drastically reduce corruption within the company. It soon became clear, as Antoine had realised, that this was not the work of isolated individuals, but that it was part of a system. And that, as a result, the response had to be systemic.

In addition to the necessary dismissals, which provided a strong reaffirmation of WaterAccess's values and zero tolerance for any criminal act, a series of measures were taken to strengthen governance, compliance, the monitoring of financial transactions and audits, and cross-checks at strategic points within the company, the introduction of an IT system able to run due diligence and control operations, the definition of the status of whistle-blower and the policy for their protection, the reinforcement of the quality of management and of all those in contact with the authorities of the country and the region, as well as a whole series of measures to educate all employees through training, coaching and mentoring.

The areas for improvement were many, interdependent and interconnected with each other.

Antoine knew it. WaterAccess had to surpass itself. Go beyond its operating methods, which were no longer appropriate. Decisively adopting and disseminating more ethical behaviours capable of giving substance to the company's values and principles. To the full. Involving everyone in the process, thus reversing a dynamic of complacency, even negligence, which had perhaps allowed criminal acts to flourish. This called for courage and discipline, and an acceptance of the timeline, because such a transformation could not be achieved overnight. The task was complex and far-reaching: to preserve what was essential, to break with what was inappropriate, with discernment, without throwing the

baby out with the bathwater. Could WaterAccess survive this vast operation? Fred had come to the conclusion that without such an initiative, its survival was in jeopardy. Just like his personal commitment and that of all those who counted neither their time nor their efforts to ensure the existence of a vision to which they were so attached. The stakes were high. The challenge colossal. In many ways.

After just a few months, the face of WaterAccess had been transformed. Antoine was well aware that the work would have to be done over and over again. But as Fred, Paula and the other members of the task force gathered on the terrace to watch the moon reflected in the distance on the surface of the new water retention basins inaugurated that very day, they all savoured the pleasure of a mission well on the way to completion. And what a mission it was!



STORY 4

SURPASSING YOURSELF CREATING ECONOMIC VALUE: INNOVATION, OR HOW TO INSPIRE THE FUTURE

Illustration 4: Hippolyte and Samuel and their Magic Wing

Leading points

In the corporate world, surpassing yourself can be seen as a powerful act of innovation, transforming the world or the way we see it in a lasting way.

Certain inventions (the wheel, for instance), certain objects (the smartphone, etc.) and certain methods (such as Taylorism) have changed our relationship with work, time and space, and our ways of relating to each other.

A *pioneering* organisation surpasses a status quo, its own and that of the ecosystem in which it operates.

Going beyond yourself and innovating are underpinned by multiple factors, including (i) permission to try without fear of error, (ii) the allocation of time for fine-tuning and repetition, (iii) acceptance of a process of improvement and testing, which can lead to a range of outcomes, including the abandonment or reorientation of the initial project or its initial form, (iv) the flexibility of (evolving) strategies and sometimes significantly revised objectives based on rigorous and uncompromising post-mortems, (v) commitment, discipline and humility.

Compared to the heroic act, there is nothing noteworthy about a company that surpasses itself merely as a result of chance. What is more relevant is the new idea that emerges from the initial “failed” experiment and which, through hard work, research and testing, is transformed into a revolutionary invention and/or a collective adventure. Or again, the idea that, by dint of being refined, improved and corrected, becomes a success.

These breakthroughs are usually collective, drawing inspiration not only from the work and ideas developed in-house by a few, but also from attempts and other ingenious processes tried elsewhere. In this respect, technological and intellectual intelligence plays an essential role in any innovation process.

At Altrad, Research and Innovation are one of the pillars of the Group's strategy, helping to increase the range of products and services, creating high added value solutions and continuously improving our processes.

In a competitive and changing market, where customer demands are showing a growing appetite for novelty, service, speed, simplicity, responsibility, personalisation and even free services, companies are engaged in a movement of continuous improvement and adaptation to their environment, which is constant, proactive and determined.

Innovation enables the Altrad Group to guarantee competitiveness, open up new markets, create more value for its customers and improve performance. By transforming the competitive landscape and opening up to the notion of increased and extended collaboration, we create a new space conducive to implementing open innovation.

Convinced that this is a business accelerator, several years ago Altrad took the bold step of developing a dynamic of openness and collaborative innovation that extended to its customers and third parties, supported by enhanced research and development teams, and backed by a network of schools, universities, laboratories and start-ups.

This cross-functional approach to innovation should make it possible to

- listen more closely to the needs and challenges of our customers
- constantly adapt our technical and commercial solutions to take account of their specific and unique needs
- encourage collaboration between the R&D and marketing departments
- mobilise our internal and external resources
- incubate new activities that will ultimately drive the Group's growth
- develop new products, services, processes and technologies to enhance customer satisfaction, safety, reliability, performance and eco-responsibility, in line with our reaffirmed *raison d'être*.

The April 2024 seminar will be an opportunity for us to consider the possibilities offered by a (re)affirmed policy of innovation:

- How far have we come in terms of innovation since 2018 and our reflections and work on Altrad's global development?
- How does the creation of our tagline "Building a sustainable world" and the *raison d'être* it underpins manifest itself in practice?
- What successes can we celebrate that demonstrate the tremendous progress we have made?
- What are the next frontiers we need to conquer if we are to continue to lead the Group along the path of growth and sustainability?
- What do we need to put in place to guarantee Altrad's sustainability while respecting our CSR commitments?
- What changes are necessary, but what elements of stability must we absolutely preserve?
- Are we personally and collectively ready to take up these challenges? Under what conditions?

At a Group level, our desire to innovate and inspire the future – our future – is a sign of our ability to surpass ourselves, not only individually but also and above all collectively.

It is up to us to define the scope of the surpassing to which we aspire.

Pitch

In the early twentieth century, somewhere in America, Hippolyte and Samuel, two young brothers, jacks of all trades and enthusiastic about everything, set themselves a daring and crazy challenge: to fly!

Giving free rein to their consuming passion, they search tirelessly for a way to defy the laws of gravity.

Their innovative “heavier than air” machine keeps evolving as their experiments and discoveries progress. But will it one day be able to soar through the air? Will they succeed in giving life and substance to their dream and marking a turning point in humanity’s history?

Characters

Hippolyte

Samuel

Their parents

A shepherd

Residents of the town

Locations

- A workshop-hangar, and the home of the family, at the foot of a hill, somewhere in America, in the early twentieth century.

His legs dangle over the river majestically winding its way some twenty metres below. The roll-up cigarette in his hand is nearly finished. He has never been scared of heights. Which is lucky for someone who loves sitting on the edge of the cliff, alone, far from the workshop and the noise of the small town on the edge of which their house stands. A chance to think, to find the solution.

He looks at the dust covering his boots. The dull sound of his heels knocking together gives rhythm to the vast silence. It is not completely still, as a muffled trickling sound rises from the meandering flow of the river below. More like a roar when you get close to it but muted up at this height.

On the horizon, the red earth merges with the blue of the sky. Soon, the grey clouds will burst and rain down on the canyon. You have to make the most of it. It doesn’t happen often at this time of year.

He reflects about his idea. Crazy! His mother had told him so. But his father, now an old man, and his brother both believe in it. Unconditionally! He thinks back to Samuel’s enthusiasm when he first shared his idea. His younger brother immediately started running around the workshop collecting pieces of metal. He thought the idea was brilliant. Daring, a true match for their boundless ambition. And their vivid imaginations.

Ever since they were little, they had been building things. Always together. Always as a twosome. Anything and everything. Shacks, go-karts, toys ... Their skilful, inventive hands created a new world, which was sometimes crazy but always useful. Without even admitting it to themselves, this was what really guided their discoveries. Things had to have a purpose, even if they often didn't know what that was when they started out.

Since his accident, their father had given up spending his days in the workshop. This was now their playground. All theirs. Lots of locals stopped by every day. Amazing what people manage to break or damage! Hippolyte and Samuel always found a solution to make a bicycle work again, turn a grindstone or a tractor engine, or repair a cart wheel.

In the evenings, their hands black with oil and their shirts stained with dirt from the road bore witness to the efforts and difficulties of the day's work. Their mother would shake her head and point to the wooden tub. They threw their clothes into it, covering them with ash and black soap, before putting the water on to boil on the big cast-iron stove. Their mother insisted on taking care of the rest.

To each his own! she often liked to say. But more and more, she let them carry the heavy pot of boiling water. Like the pastor, she too was getting old.

He takes a last drag on his cigarette, its glowing tip singeing his thumb and forefinger, before throwing it down to the water that snaked its way under his feet. To avoid smoking another cigarette, he picks a stalk of grass and starts chewing on it. The slightly bitter juice trickles into his mouth. He spits onto the stones a little further away. And goes back to his meditation. His reflection, rather. He finds it hard to let his mind wander at the moment. He knows that his best ideas come when he's not expecting them. But right now, he really wants to figure things out. So he forces his brain to think.

How long had he been sitting like this, dangling his feet above the void when he spots a leaf falling almost in front of his eyes, twirling? A leaf weighted down at one end by a slight bulge around which the leaf itself – the wing – turns. As it falls, it makes a movement in the air that is both graceful and elliptical, a downward, spiral-like revolution, as if orderly, almost mechanical. At first he observes it without seeing it, until suddenly his brain lights up.

He jumps to his feet. He has pins and needles in his legs. And yet he starts running towards his parents' house and shoves open the high wooden door of the barn they use as a workshop. Paying no attention to the dog, which yelps with joy when it sees him coming and jumps up on his thighs, he shouts:

— Samuel! This is it! I've got an idea!

He and Samuel have been working for nearly two years on what they call *Our Invention*, the topic of family conversations every evening. So far they haven't been able to find the exact name for it. They've tried several, but never settled on one; every new improvement they make changes the project. But never the ambition. That remains intact: to be lighter than air. It's the means of achieving it that evolves, with the shape of their ... no, no definitive name!

They had started off with something they were familiar with: a bicycle. The workshop was full of spare parts, bits of metal, springs and cables. All they needed was a piece of canvas. Their mother sewed together some old sheets. That would do for a

sail. Every evening, they set off from the top of the hill, Samuel, who was lighter, sitting on the saddle and Hippolyte running behind him, to give their craft more strength and speed.

Despite their efforts and the adjustments they made, the bike never took off. They replaced the sheets with muslin. But that wasn't enough. So every morning, they went for a walk in the countryside and watched the birds with envy.

— You're not pushing hard enough, Hippo!

— You and your bike are too heavy, Sam! We need to lighten the structure.

They would shut themselves away for hours after their day's work to try and solve the insoluble equation. The sail, instead of helping them take off, slowed them down when it inflated and was powerless to lift the metal bike whose wheels never left the ground.

How could they defy gravity? How could they propel their machine? The two brothers strained their eyes looking at the many sketches and models they made, the oil lamp sitting on their workbench. Until they fell asleep or were dragged out of the workshop by their father, who got worried when they didn't come to dinner.

— We have to forget about the bicycle. It's not the right structure. I went back to the drawing board last night. Take a look!

— Well, I see someone's taken advantage of his walk by the river!

— Look, Sam, I redrafted the whole thing last night. What do you think?

— This thing is amazing! And you really think it could work? That we'll be able to take off?

— We have to try! We've got it all wrong, so far! Wheels are not a bad idea, to gain speed. But the shape of our device, it doesn't fit. It doesn't cut through the air. It's not aerodynamic enough. We need something more aerodynamic. Just look at it! And it needs more lift. I've revised the shape of the wings.

Samuel looked at the sketch. Despite his concentration, he couldn't hide his excitement.

— It's incredible, Hippo. Where did you find all this? And what's that thing at the end?

— A propeller.

The workshop resonated with the sounds of their construction: hammers, saws, the two young men moved huge quantities of metal until their hands and arms were numb. Valiant, their faith firmly enmeshed in their bodies, they went on tirelessly. Each new discovery raised hopes to match their efforts and tenacity, only to be dashed with each new failure. Until, after a night's sleep, their willpower took over again.

Their mother looked on, touched and worried at the same time. Admittedly, they were young and full of energy. But the long hours of work in the heat or cold, the relentlessness, the disappointments, the frustrations ... What toll would all these setbacks take on their health and their hopes? How many more unsuccessful attempts and how much more fatigue could they take? Hippolyte and Samuel corrected her:

— These are not inconclusive trials, Mother. On the contrary. We're much further ahead than we were two years ago! the two brothers replied in unison.

She watched the heaps of metal and aborted projects rusting away in the yard, but said nothing, aware that sharing her own fears was ultimately unproductive.

Their father was more optimistic. He was a visionary himself, who every Sunday set about helping his fellows to reconsider their condition in the light of the sacred texts, of course, but also of more iconoclastic readings. He embraced tradition with all the honours befitting his position, but he sometimes tampered with it when he sensed that it was becoming a handicap, that it was getting in the way of progress. Progress. The word had such a special, intoxicating ring to it!

At first, the church members were surprised. They didn't like having their convictions challenged. But as the months and years went by, they got used to it, until they found interest and comfort in the words of this original pastor. Their pastor. As for his two sons, they were a source of amusement. Their extravagance and reckless words were readily mocked. But people also recognised their skilful hands. And, after all, their madness didn't really bother anyone.

Their father sometimes received illustrated magazines with news of the world. One evening, their backs bent over in exhaustion, Samuel mechanically turned the pages of the latest issue. It spoke of mad inventors who, far away, on another continent, were stubbornly trying to fly.

Their dream! The same dream on both sides of the ocean! How was it possible that spirits could meet at two such distant points on the planet without ever having seen or spoken to each other? Samuel was taken aback!

— Hippo! Come and have a look! Quick!

Clearly, the European engineers were more advanced than they were. Samuel and Hippolyte studied the sketches and explanations late into the night, trying to fill in the blanks, the mysteries, the discretions: everything that the article omitted, for reasons of patriotism and industrial secrecy.

Something new struck them when they read the journals to which they themselves now subscribed. It was true that they searched through the learned articles for information on scientific progress around the world, but they also perceived an urgent need. A double urgency. That of being among the first to succeed in the mad gamble of flying, but also that of responding to a potential use for *Our Invention* at a time which people increasingly recognised as troubled and tense. Of course, wars and uprisings seemed a long way off for anyone living in the depths of America, but a few months later, a visit from the military after their first successful flight would convince them that *Our Invention* was *The Invention of the Century*.

Having abandoned the bicycle structure, the two brothers designed a biplane glider on Hippolyte's instructions. The sheets were now stretched taut, with a small cockpit supported by two wheels on either side.

The biplane continued to evolve through trials and partially unsuccessful attempts. The two engineers ignored the mockery of the neighbours who came to watch the announced take-off, convinced that they would get their money's worth: the brothers were always laughed at for their disappointments and the strange appearance of their flying machine ... well ... one that spent most of its time on wheels.

The wingspan of the biplane increased, and with it the lift. The profile was evolving, and with it the aerodynamics. The addition of a stabiliser and rudder was decisive. Now big enough to take a pilot on board – Samuel, the lighter of the two – the aircraft continued to improve and log new successes. More distance covered, more time in the air. But the results, while encouraging, remained modest.

To their mother, who told them to be careful when she saw her youngest rise a few metres into the air before crashing at the foot of the hill, Hippolyte replied:

— Mother, we're succeeding. It's no longer a failure, though it's not yet a success. But every flight, every test is a success, because we learn a little more each time.

She wasn't sure how these words were meant to be reassuring, but she accepted them. Can genius be curbed?

One morning, Samuel got up first. He was keen to try something they had never tried before. It would involve increasing the initial speed. After hours of thinking about it, he was now convinced. One of the keys was the initial momentum. If the craft couldn't get off the ground, then propulsion was required. He had turned the problem over and over in his mind. And even if Hippolyte didn't agree, he was going to try. He had to try.

Before the house was even awake, he went to the hangar. The umpteenth version of their machine was waiting to be tested. He would do it now. Even though his brother had presented him with numerous arguments to put him off the idea. He had to try it to be sure. Nothing would speak louder than a real test. All their clever calculations, all their sketches, they were no match for the proof of experience.

With some effort, he managed to activate the machine and push it out of the hangar. Usually, it took two of them to handle it, or even three when their father lent a hand. He hadn't realised how complicated everything would be alone. Without even closing the heavy door behind him, he pushed the prototype, but not in the direction of the east side of the hill, as usual. No, this time he headed for the west side. Much steeper. On this western side, the meadow had a much steeper gradient. And at the far end, the terrain came to a sudden sheer halt: above the river flowing far below. Very far. According to his calculations, he would gain sufficient speed before reaching the cliff, which would effectively replace rear propulsion, for which he and Hippolyte had not yet found a solution. And the wing would help lift him into the air once he was above the void. It would work. It had to work.

After several long minutes, he managed to take up a position at the top of the hill. The sun was rising behind him. It would be a few more hours before it warmed the countryside. Samuel adjusted the collar of his jacket. He was wearing a kind of leather cap that covered his ears, attached to fairly wide glasses to protect his eyes from the wind and dust. He inhaled deeply. In the light of the rising sun, he had to push the biplane all by himself to get it into the perfect position: on the steepest slope. He had tied a rope to the structure to hold it in place, just in case. As he tied the rope around his waist, he laughed at his own naivety. He knew he'd never be able to hold anything back given the speed the biplane was about to pick up. At best, he would be dragged along and have to run faster before jumping into the cockpit.

He took a deep breath and pushed with all his might on the tail of the aircraft. With a metallic creak, it moved forward and began to roll down the hill. Fast. Much faster than Samuel had expected. Too fast! Despite running so hard, he couldn't keep up with the machine that had gone mad. Like an out of control horse, it kept gaining speed and heading straight for the edge of the cliff. For the first few metres, Samuel managed to stay on his feet. Suddenly, his foot hit a stone stuck in the ground. He stumbled only slightly, but enough to knock him off balance. He fell heavily to the ground, but he was immediately picked up again, pulled by the rope tied to his belt. Unable to get to his

feet, the unstoppable machine dragged him along. Together they were heading straight for disaster, for the void!

Samuel tried to untie the rope, but the tension, the speed and the position he was in prevented him from doing anything. He thought of his family, his brother in particular, their dream about to vanish. In silence, he prayed, before letting out a howl as he reached the end of the meadow. The biplane lifted off, glided for a few moments and then plunged steeply towards the river, taking Samuel with it, powerless and resolved to die. And that was it. The end. It was all over. These were the last thoughts he had before crashing into the surface of the icy water. And then nothing.

Around seven o'clock, Hippolyte was surprised to not see his brother in the bed next to his. He leapt to his feet and ran to the shed. As soon as he saw the door open, he understood.

— Samuel! Samuel! His anxious voice echoed off the hills, but never gave him the answer he was looking for.

Without even thinking, he rushed towards the river. At first, he saw nothing and felt reassured. But after a few moments, he saw their biplane lying near the bank, submerged in the river, its wing broken in two.

He called out to his brother again, but to no avail. Only the echo of his voice answered. He began climbing down to the river, where the terrain was less steep, allowing a descent that was certainly risky and dangerous, but still possible. Several times, he fell, sliding on the earth that carried him, too, towards the winding river.

Out of breath, he stopped for a moment. It was then that he thought he heard a faint moan. He mustered up all his energy and slid down to the bank. His mother would curse him for ruining his trousers. No! she wouldn't say a word, too happy that he was bringing her youngest son back to her!

When he reached the bottom, he called Samuel. The moan he had thought he heard was now just a memory. Now that he was level with their disjointed craft, all he could hear was the sound of water. Furiously, he lifted the wing, which had finally detached itself from the rest of the craft. He pushed it back violently; the river did the rest of the work and carried it away in its current before letting it run aground a few metres further along. Submerged, the passenger compartment was overturned, face down. Against the riverbed. With a strength he didn't know he had, he freed the wheel structure, which clung to a dead tree trunk. That's when he heard it again. The moan. Samuel's voice.

Rather than turn over what was left of the biplane, he dived fully clothed into the river. He was struck by the chill of the water. He climbed back into the overturned aircraft and saw Samuel's body lying motionless under the water. Only his head, miraculously, was resting on the edge of the craft, in the thin pocket of air formed by the almost completely flooded cockpit.

Carefully, he set about freeing his unconscious brother. The plane was sinking. Soon they would be out of oxygen. He had to be quick! Hippolyte dived back under the water to run his hand over his brother's unconscious body. Nothing seemed to be pinning him down. He grabbed him under his arms, embracing his brother's back. He managed to move him a little, but suddenly felt resistance. He couldn't move him any further. Clearly,

something was blocking his movement. He put his brother's head back down as gently as he could and dived in again. That's when he saw the tightly knotted rope that was trapping his brother's waist and immobilising him against the biplane.

It took several tries before he managed to untie the rope. Hippolyte's hands were frozen. He found it increasingly difficult to move his fingers. Yet he wasn't thinking about the bite of the cold. He was obsessed with one thing: saving his little brother. At last! The rope loosened and Hippolyte managed to slip the knot.

Samuel's body floated free, inert. Holding his brother's head so that he could continue to breathe, Hippolyte whispered to him:

— Sam, we're going to get out of this. But to do that, I need you to help me. If you can hear me, breathe in. As deep as you can. We're going to have to dive. I'll swim for both of us, but I need you to stay under for a few seconds. We're gonna make it! Do you hear me?!

Surprisingly, he felt calm, despite the cold that was beginning to freeze his movements and the anxiety plaguing his thoughts. He took a deep breath, holding his brother close so that his breathing would follow suit. And then he took his brother's body with him under the water.

The two of them had to fight against the current, which was determined to carry them away. The distance between the biplane and the bank was very short. It seemed infinite. Furiously, Hippolyte managed to pull himself out of the water holding Samuel. He placed him as gently as possible on the sandy bank. Both of them shivered all over.

He began to rub Samuel's still unconscious body with his cold hands. When he touched his right leg, his brother screamed. The leg was broken. The pain brought him out of his comatose state, before he fainted again. Hippolyte began to shout:

— Help! Help!

His desperate voice ricocheted back at him from the cliff.

But after a few moments, he heard a man's voice calling from a distance. He looked up and saw the shepherd who grazed his flock not far away. He waved his arms and cupped his hands to his mouth.

— Are you all right down there?

— Quick, help! Hurry!

The man gave a thumbs up and ran off. He kept his word. Help arrived a few moments later.

Samuel was asleep, warm in his bed, covered with a feather quilt, his leg strapped in a splint. The doctor had arrived quickly, as soon as the men from the town had managed to take the wounded young aviator back to his parents. Hippolyte was trying to keep warm by the stove. Despite the hot bath, the dry clothes and scalding broth, he was still shivering.

— That's it! I'm stopping everything! We're calling it quits! he repeated to his father, who was sitting opposite him.

— Is this the right time to make such a decision? asked the wise pastor.

— Samuel nearly died, Dad. He almost died! You nearly lost your son! shouted Hippolyte. It's all my fault! I'm the one who put the idea of flying into his head. What a fool I was!

His father went on in a calm voice:

— Hippo, this dream isn't yours. It belongs to both of you. You've had it for a long time. Samuel as much as you. It's a decision you'll make together. I think that's the way to do it: decide together. Don't you agree?

Hippolyte withheld his answer. His father, as so often, was right. He would wait until Samuel regained consciousness before discussing it with him.

— Never! We'll never give up! Do you hear me?

The force of Samuel's voice contrasted with his pale, weakened body still stretched out on the bed. With an effort, he sat up, emphasising his determination with the movement of his torso.

— We've never been this close to our goal, Hippo. This is no time to give up! We're going on. That's all there is to it! It's non-negotiable.

Hippolyte didn't negotiate. He didn't even try, no doubt too pleased with his brother's total commitment to their work, which Samuel's accident had in no way diminished.

And he allowed himself to be convinced by this impetuous young brother, with whom, for as long as he could remember, he had played, repaired, created and invented. The special alchemy that emanated from their two characters, so close and yet so different, this emergence of innovation and intelligence, he couldn't let it be lost or vanish. He knew only too well how precious and vital it was. For both of them.

So he continued his research and his trials. After a few weeks, Samuel was walking again and could even stand up for several hours a day in the workshop. Together, they explored Hippolyte's idea: propellers were soon fixed to a new version of their biplane. Its wingspan was increased still further. And above all, in the future it would be driven by an engine.

From then on, crowds turned out to watch the brothers' trials. As well as the people from the neighbouring town, many curious onlookers had heard about their crazy project. Perhaps they were all a little aware that before their astonished eyes a page of history was being written. With a capital H.

More and more flights were being made, along with more and more adjustments. By adding propellers and an internal combustion engine, the project entered a whole new stage of development. Their MagicWing – the name finally found – was soon able to carry out longer flights over ever greater distances and at ever greater heights. By the following year, the aircraft could turn and fly for more than half an hour. Success followed success. The two-seater model they inaugurated a few months later, with a more powerful engine, aroused the keen interest of the American army.

In faraway Russia, the revolution had been rumbling for several years, shaking the Tsarist regime. Tensions between European states were increasingly apparent, even if, in accordance with human nature, many chose to play them down in order to keep dancing.

The enthusiasts all held their breath with each new flight. Hippolyte and Samuel made spectacular demonstrations wherever they were called upon. In the air, the audacity of the two brothers lit up the clouds of their country and of Europe in letters of gold, setting fire to the hearts of adventurers the world over. Their personal destiny, intimately linked to that of aviation, escaped them a little. They were accomplishing something bigger than themselves, much bigger, the officers kept telling them, something that surpassed them.

— What you have inspired and will continue to inspire in this new industry will forever be engraved in the pages of human history!

Hippolyte found these words pompous, Samuel found them grandiloquent, but they both relished their success, whose incredible potential they both realised.

Back in America, on the strength of their exploits, they decided, on their father's recommendation, to found a company in their own name, to continue developing new versions of their MagicWing. Others joined them, together with intrepid pioneers who, at a time when virtually everything remained to be done and proven, had joined the two brothers in the daring wager of aviation. They were talented engineers and mechanics, but they were also men capable of telling a story and carrying to the four corners of the world the tale of the extraordinary.

A contagious fever for innovation, coupled with unshakeable optimism, gave wings to this crack team, united around a dream. A dream that has now become reality.

Less than a year later, the very serious *Scientific American* put an end to the initial ridicule and sweeping judgements that had marked the beginnings of Hippolyte and Samuel's trials as "a hoax!" Now they were celebrating their achievement, calling it "a feat!"

Their unflinching research, the many tests and the feedback, their disappointments and setbacks and what they learned from them, the technical exchanges with the other pioneers they met on their travels, their tenacity, their persistent efforts, their vision ... soon, the hangar housed in the barn was no longer equal to their formidable epic: that of the great adventure of aeronautics. An adventure with a capital A.

When journalists asked about their exceptional career, Hippolyte replied modestly:

— We were lucky enough to grow up in a stimulating intellectual environment, where there was space for creativity and innovation.

Sitting on the edge of the cliff, with Samuel beside him, taking a drag on a shared cigarette, Hippolyte gazes into the distance. A bird of prey soars across the horizon. Its cry reaches them, despite the rumble of the river below them, pulsing with late summer storms.

— That bird is also heavier than air, and yet ...

He puts his arm around his younger brother's shoulder, which touches his own.

As if weightless, they savour their victory. Together.

















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