

Ambition at the Heart of Change

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Pascal CROSET

Ambition at the Heart of Change

A lesson in management
from the South

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DUNOD

From the author

The author takes personal responsibility for the editorial and methodological choices made in this book, which does not pretend in any way to be an exhaustive description of all of the facts marking the transformations that the OCP Group has experienced. Similarly, the analyses found here are nothing more than a reflection of the author's personal interpretations and opinions. They do not represent the position of the OCP Group or its management.

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PREFACE

Mostafa Terrab
Chairman and CEO, OCP Group

Leadership is a responsibility, a challenge and an enigma. It is also an exercise in multi-tasking that, at times, is almost schizophrenic in nature. It means always being receptive to dialectic thinking. Enacting your desires yet keeping a sense of humility. Preparing plans yet cultivating a tolerance for chaos. Decentralising yet implementing effective strategic centrality. Reviving a company's glorious past yet reinventing its future. Emphasizing production yet inspiring a proactive commercial approach in sync with the big changes that the phosphates market has witnessed in recent times.

OCP's transformation over the past five years has been an arduous, complex and multifaceted process. Turning a bastion of the Moroccan State into a truly lean and competitive company, combining ethics with economic performance, strategic determination with responsiveness to events and national embeddedness with a global outlook – all of this requires much more than a simple deployment of standard managerial techniques. It has also been a human, physical and even metaphysical adventure characterised by numerous challenges, a multitude of breakthroughs and complex thinking. An adventure that requires people to create meaning, organise their strengths, mobilise resources like reflectivity, action and life – all within a framework defined by the body and soul of their own sense of commitment.

Measuring oneself against the cruel, rude and tough reality of a century-old industrial company means acting and thinking in a way that enables action. As hard as it can be to act, however, it is just as hard to talk about one's actions. For this to happen, a person needs to be or become a reflective practitioner, focused on a cyclical wheel of enlightened action: doing,

learning, adjusting; doing, learning, adjusting; doing, learning, etc. Within this movement, there needs to be both a deep resolve and an endless ability to ask questions about managers' practices. This reflexivity is indispensable to ensure that an action is right, and to gain a real understanding of situations that will necessarily be novel. It is what people need to be able to cope with the challenges and issues of the day.

Such reflexivity, which is the polar opposite of consanguinity in any of its forms, has governed our interactions with the author, who has enjoyed complete intellectual autonomy and, indeed, used this to implement an analytical approach where he often puts us on the spot. Even surprised us. But never failed to excite us, even when we did not agree with him. This independence, distance and critical ability has bolstered his credibility. Dialogue between actors and observers is a precondition for any real investment in knowledge.

Pascal Croset's book is here to illuminate, inspire and instruct us. He has named, framed and shaped our thinking, fleshing out our vision of managing with his own sense of *niyya*, meaning his sincerity, trust, transparency, lack of ulterior motives, truthfulness about what is happening or being done and willingness to name things in order to be able to act upon them. Pascal Croset has opened our eyes to the catalysts driving our movement, original processes that we used to create managerial practices but which have already become part of the history of OCP, of Morocco and of our emerging modernity. By giving the author special access to the very heart of our action, we were providing ourselves with a way of finding out who we have become, both through change and as a result of it. Understanding the substance of a living company means more than looking at the sum of its processes. It means capturing the thickness of real practice, embracing things that are not self-evident and can, in fact, often be enigmatic. What we have here is true knowledge. It is something that exists on a plane far above professors' shiny truisms or consultants' professional jargon.

Compiling and substantiating this kind of collective intelligence in a book is one way of sharing this memory along with the lessons it teaches us: first and foremost within our company; but also externally, where there is a chance that our work might one day spark a movement with far-reaching effects.

FOREWORD

A NEW KIND OF LESSON IN MANAGEMENT

Michel Berry
Founder and Director
École de Paris du Management

This book is the story of a rather extraordinary mutation, the history of an opaque and sclerotic company that took no more than four years to become a global leader in its field. Its name is the *Office chérifien des phosphates* (OCP) and it is Morocco's largest company. This is a singular case conveying a number of universal lessons. What Pascal Croset has offered here is a new reading of this adventure, one that will give leaders and their lieutenants new ways of thinking about how to conduct radical organisational transformation.

At the same time, readers should not search for ready-made recipes in this book, if only because they rarely work. Firstly, there is no such thing as a universal solution. Responses to management problems are always singular and must consider local contexts, which depend in turn on specific technical, institutional, cultural and individual factors. Questions, on the other hand, are capable of being more general in nature. Companies everywhere need to balance their accounts, raise funding, create alliances, motivate employees, etc. Although each must find its own path, all can be enriched by the way in which other companies have dealt with similar challenges. Studying how our counterparts have coped with some of the issues they have faced teaches us a lot about how we should deal with ours.

Hence the usefulness of this book. OCP's management has had to overcome a number of challenges. Anyone looking to engage in radical transformation will find themselves facing similar problems one day.

RADICAL TRANSFORMATION—A HEADACHE FOR MANAGERS

It is worth exploring a few of these issues in greater detail.

Taking charge in a company

When new executives are first appointed (notably when they have been given the mission of reforming a company), they start with two challenges: affirming their power; and familiarising themselves with the company, its identity and how it functions. To succeed, they will need information far beyond the kinds of reassuring utterances that come from most of their new colleagues, whose main purpose will be to ingratiate themselves with the new power. But even while they are still learning how things work, certain decisions will already have to be made. After all, life never stops. Indeed, in more bureaucratised companies, life continues in the shape of mountains of forms that need to be signed, and official decisions that will have to be made. If executives take too long before forming and asserting their own vision, they will be forced to run with the decisions taken by predecessors pursuing their own logic. The risk here is getting caught up in the old system, like a fly in a spider web. In short, taking charge of a new company is a very fraught time for any new executive. Hence the usefulness of seeing how Mostafa Terrab went about this task.

Revealing hidden vices without stigmatising people

Machiavelli advised the Prince against changing institutions. “And it ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. Thus it happens

that whenever those who are hostile have the opportunity to attack they do it like partisans, whilst the others defend lukewarmly, in such wise that the prince is endangered along with them.”¹ Indeed, change often seems easier in a company suffering from a full-blown crisis, since the people benefiting from the old order are few and far between.

Yet when a company has ostensibly achieved an equilibrium where members do not see any particular threats on the horizon, things can be much harder. One possibility is to carry out an audit to uncover any hidden problems and make sure that everyone is aware of the need for change. This counters the arguments of those who believe that change is unnecessary. It might in fact lead to their departure. But if too many people in an organisation feel stigmatised, threatened or disrespected, it can fall into a state of depression that might in turn impede the desired upheaval. The question then becomes how to destabilise without demotivating, i.e. how to stake out a space in an organisation without threatening its sources of strength. It is at this level that we should meditate upon the responses that OCP found.

Channeling consultants’ energies

In this book, Pascal Croset has used the image of energy to represent change. In his view, transforming an organisation means mobilising a great deal of energy. To speed up the process, senior managers will often call in a whole host of consultants, offering expertise as well as considerable energy. If this energy is not channelled appropriately, however, things can go very badly indeed, especially when the organisation has become more fragile as a result of this tactic, meaning that its members are confused and no longer in a position to act as antibodies preventing an infection from spreading.

OCP called in a slew of consultants from many different firms, including some of the world’s most prestigious names. In an organisation that is inward-looking and somewhat sleepy, this kind of choice could have been dangerous. Yet in the words of the consultants themselves, the procedures and debates that they were asked to engage in were among the most challenging that they had ever faced. How consultants should be managed is another area where OCP has lessons to teach us – specifically regarding the kind of tensions that can exist between expertise and management.

1. *The Prince*, Chapter VI – Concerning New Principalities Which Are Acquired By One’s Own Arms And Ability. Translation by W. K. Marriott, 1908.

Old and new, young and old, nomad and sedentary

The management of radical change is often accompanied by the arrival of people bearing a modernising vision of the firm. This can cause quarrels between the old guard and the modernisers, with the former seeing the latter as invaders and even barbarians whereas the latter view the former as sticks in the mud hanging onto their old territories, practices and privileges. This kind of confrontation can in turn cause conflict between sedentary and nomadic employees, the kind of situation that has historically been very dangerous. For OCP, this was particularly risky insofar as many of the new arrivals were highly educated Moroccans returning from overseas, and who might have looked down their noses at those who had always stayed home. This did not happen, however, revealing little by little a particular type of know-how that would soon be wielded with great subtlety.

Never forget the frontline business

One of the more dangerous ideas that management courses and texts convey, intentionally or otherwise, is that it is more or less possible to manage everything in the same way, i.e. that there is no real difference between an automotive, agribusiness or electronics company. For new executive teams, this significantly increases a risk of distancing themselves from frontline realities or many of the other things that business needs. Indeed, the ties inside of large companies between headquarters and local subsidiaries are problematic by their very nature, given the tendency during times of radical change for people's agendas to stagnate while they cope with emergencies – a situation that puts their concerns even further away from the new reality.

The question then becomes how frontline realities can be made apparent to the new power, and how the latter might communicate to frontline colleagues a sense that their professionalism and experience still gets respect, and that they remain important. What the book reveals at this level is the importance that OCP attached to gaining a true understanding of its production function, and how this ended up becoming a real advantage for the company.

One possible way of overcoming the split between headquarters and subsidiaries is by having a decentralisation policy that facilitates adjustments to local contexts. Of course, this creates the problem of how to empower local actors who are not entirely trustworthy (or at least, not yet), or unac-

customed to the exercise of power (when they come from a bureaucratic system where static equilibrium was the only way forward).

OCP acted very inventively in balancing the power of the centre and the periphery, as the two sides are known in organisational sociology.

Engaging without having the appropriate knowledge or competencies

Pascal Croset has highlighted a major contradiction in his book. When a company is undergoing a transformation process, not only must new structures and management systems be created but each must also function differently from the way it used to. Manufacturing teams must find new ways of manufacturing; sales staff must take a different approach to markets and customers; buyers must develop new relationships with suppliers; senior management and human resources must change their ways of recruiting, assessing and promoting staff members, etc. The transformation of a company is tantamount to a gigantic exercise in learning – and it is not always clear at the beginning where or how the necessary knowledge can be acquired.

This whole process seemed up in the air at OCP. Given the company's knowledge and competency levels when the new executive first started, there appeared to be little chance that the new executive would achieve his goals. Of course, OCP did bring in a number of experts to help – but their presence was temporary, plus there was always a need to consider how staff members would enact change once the consultants went.

Engaging an ambition therefore meant following in the footsteps of a much older history and digging roots in the realities of production and sales. It also meant accepting certain principles of realism that were not necessarily achievable, given the company's state of competency at the time.

Accepting chaos

All in all, this was going to be a somewhat erratic process featuring a great deal of trial and error, not to mention a modicum of incoherence caused by protagonists' insufficient level of knowledge and know-how. A few examples of this will be provided below. To overcome these hurdles without losing faith, a rare tolerance for chaos would become necessary. After all, for many people, a good organisation means a system where everything is laid out clearly. This is exemplified in the French culture, for instance, by a generalised enthusiasm for well-maintained gardens.

One key moment in the adventure being narrated here was the way that Mostafa Terrab manifested – and demanded – a tolerance for chaos, while encouraging colleagues to do the same. As a systems theory specialist (a discipline he had taught at MIT, where he was a renowned researcher), Mr. Terrab was aware of the systemic effects accompanying any transformation. Rather than trying to avoid them, his idea was that they should be embraced. This does not mean that he was advocating total anarchy. Instead, it involved establishing a series of milestones that differed in nature from the kinds of aims and plans that tend to be used when the weather is fine and the horizon clear.

Counting on people

Bosses traditionally like to talk about how important it is to invest in people. This raises the question of why people can get so negative about companies to the point of losing faith in them. Some would say that the blame lies with two-faced employers' doublespeak but there is absolutely no evidence for this. Most business leaders sincerely believe that people are the key factor in wealth creation, meaning that their prime concern is how to continue investing in people at a time when markets and the general outlook are constantly changing; how to reconcile their desire to build trust-based relationships with the lesser competitiveness that can ensue and how to give people a feeling that they are appreciated even as certain actions are being taken that tend to destabilise them.

There can be a huge difference between the generosity embodied within certain ideas and the gestures accompanying their implementation. It will become clear that this was a major area of focus for Mostafa Terrab, as witnessed by certain public gestures he made attesting to his attentiveness and willingness to listen to people, even at the lowest rungs of the corporate hierarchy – an approach also seen in his particular vision of how to relate to colleagues, something that Pascal Croset describes as the art of deliberative management.

The power of dreams

When people are driven by a dream, what they are capable of doing can be very different from what they end up doing, because they have to, because it is what they are used to or simply because they are afraid. Someone who is “heavier than air” will dream of flying – a crazy dream, but of course also

this is what gave birth to aviation. Yet chasing windmills can be waste of time. What people need is to have their head in the clouds and their feet on the ground. The pioneers of aviation provide a good example of this.

The business world often runs up against some fairly challenging realities: the resistance of materials; institutional and regulatory inertia; competitive pressures; political obstacles, etc. Dreams can quickly evaporate under the weight of these constraints, with realism followed by a kind of fatalistic status quo. Transformation will not occur if the executive cannot engender and nurture dreams that are sufficiently sustainable for the company's managers to want to make an effort and for staff members to want to be part of it. OCP's story has also been very instructive from this perspective.

FROM WHAT TO DO TO HOW TO DO IT

Napoleon used to say that strategy is a matter of execution. The same applies to companies. In all of the questions raised above, the key issue was probably less knowing what to do than knowing how to do it.

Obstacles to the observation of practice

Management literature likes to talk about what needs to be done to implement a strategy but says little about what really happens when executives try to transform a company. Yet many practitioners agree that it is crucial to analyse the way things really do happen – although, having said that, when asked to open their companies up to researchers filling in the gap, they often object that theirs is a delicate situation, meaning they think that their people are too busy to be disturbed.

An abundant literature was produced back in the days when dissections were prohibited, but it is only once they became legal that medical knowledge really advanced. The analogy for the business world is a vivisection revealing that something is being hidden. This is a major obstacle to management research.

Organising improbable encounters

Hence the need to organise improbable encounters between researchers and actors ready to subject themselves to observation and questioning. This demands rare virtues from researchers and executives alike.

For researchers, the risk is that the material they are compiling does not mesh with current academic fashion. This can be dangerous for their careers. To overcome this, they have to be both adventurous and freethinkers.

Executives, on the other hand, must be willing to let curious observers look inside organisations that are often very worried about managing their image. They have to let the outsiders see all of the company's internal inconsistencies, more or less acknowledge whatever conflicts that exist and be willing to accept criticism. All of which requires a great deal of strength.

I intentionally used the expression “organising improbable encounters” since it is not enough for researchers and practitioners to simply decide to take a journey together. The relationship between the two partners, who have very different outlooks, must also be managed. I have exercised this art for more than 30 years now and can say hand on heart that the project covered by this book is one of the more extraordinary that I have ever experienced, involving as it does a large company committed to radical transformation and accepting – despite the sensitivity of its situation – that a book be written about its transformation, while letting us carry out our investigations as we saw fit and communicate whatever we saw. Senior management not only agreed that the company be named but, even more unusually, that the main players be named as well. This made it possible to resituate management in its more embodied, committed, engaged and acknowledged dimensions. It also left us free to fully explore the logic of the process, and to talk about things (and people) in their real name. Of course, such freedom brought its own responsibilities. Indeed, the collaboration on offer here was so extraordinary that it is useful to see how it began.

JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF MANAGEMENT

Between 1995 and 2000, one of the dissertations I was supervising at École Polytechnique in France seemed very unusual to me and my colleagues, both in terms of the subject matter and the PhD candidate writing it. The topic was how a company's fortunes can be revived, based on an emblematic case study – Morocco's Jerada mine – revolving around an initiative that the candidate, Amar Drissi, had carried out himself. Not only was Amar successful with his dissertation but he also continued to

revive a number of struggling companies. We stayed in touch and in 2009 he started talking with me, very enthusiastically, about a project in which he got involved after being recruited by Mostafa Terrab, the President of OCP, who had started a transformation process that was even more incredible than what had happened at Jerada. Amar felt that there would be great value in letting people know about Morocco's ability to transform itself, while also helping the company to analyse the actions that it was in the process of taking.

Looking for a rare bird

We agreed in summer 2009 to write a book on this topic but still had to find someone available to investigate it – someone with a strong will but also capable of remaining sufficiently neutral to communicate with all and sundry. This person had to have a curious mind, a sense of adventure and a love of writing. He or she also needed to be free to start this fascinating project soon, a constraint that I worried would keep most researchers away. Hence my decision to look outside of the world of research, at which point Pascal Croset became the obvious choice.

With his PhD from the École Polytechnique's CRG (Management Research Center), Pascal still had some ties to the world of management research, despite have chosen to pursue a career as an independent consultant. I knew that his was a curious mind and that he liked to explore things – figuratively but also literally, as witnessed by his regular expeditions to the North Pole. By happenstance, Pascal had just finished a long contract and after a telephone conversation lasting only a few short minutes, he agreed in principle to the project. His only condition was that he be able to pursue plans to go on a solo expedition around Spitsbergen in an ocean kayak the following June...

Pascal met Amar Drissi the next week. The two began very soon to enthuse about the project's possibilities, and a draft collaboration contract was prepared shortly thereafter. One final step remained, namely the meeting with Mostafa Terrab. This would happen at OCP headquarters in Casablanca. The interview confirmed people's initial intuitions and gave us a better understanding of what to expect. For Mostafa Terrab, the project's significance was not only the fact that it would be disseminated widely but above all that it would help his OCP colleagues to master the transformations they were starting to implement – benefiting towards this end from the analysis of an external observer.

A funny kind of observer

Pascal Croset travelled back and forth between Casablanca and Paris many times, always with stories for me about what he had seen. I found this instructive but also an opportunity to take a step back from the project. Pascal told me on several occasions, with great wonderment, that he had never seen a transformation carried out with as much brio. I suggested that he focus less on his sense of marvel and more on the things he was actually observing. Ethnologists are all familiar with the risk of falling in love with their fieldwork, something commonly referred to as “going native”. Without being aware of this, it is very easy to adopt the ways of thinking (and the problems) of the people you are supposed to be observing.

At the same time, I thought it was great the way that Pascal was able to gain everyone’s trust. This might have been a problem, given the strange role he was asked to play. Indeed, people kept wondering what he was doing there. At the start of the investigation, he was even invited to lunch by the President, who kept him for five hours. Which is quite fantastic when you come to think about it.

Throwing things away before you can start writing about them

I once asked an ethnologist what were the biggest problems that the first scientists in this field had faced and he answered, “Too much data! They compile so much that they don’t know how to sort it. Sometimes they wish that when they send out eight canoes, only one returns!”

What this means is that to be useful to readers operating at a great distance from the front lines of fieldwork, you have to throw things away. This can be very hard for an author, and I sense that I could sometimes be a real pain for Pascal. Having said that, his expedition to Spitsbergen did help him get rid of things. Indeed, the only time I felt any real fear during this entire process was when he sent the message, “Hello, everything is fine! A bear destroyed my kayak last night because it wanted to get at the food but there are some Polish scientists out here who should be able to pick me up.”

Learning from history

It is not enough to simply throw things away, however. You need to adopt a certain editorial attitude if you are going to learn something from the adventure you are studying. Indeed, what we aspire to is precisely this new kind of lesson. It was after a few long discussions between Pascal Croset and

myself, analysing point by point and theme by theme the different ways of articulating specific narratives and broader lessons, that this lesson from Morocco finally took shape.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM MOROCCO

Once upon a time (and not so long ago), things were clear. On one side, there were the Western countries, with their powerful companies and mastery of managerial knowledge and method. On the other hand, there were the developing countries, which we needed to help by teaching them our methods.

Everything is different today. Following the awakening of the “four Asian dragons” (South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan), today we have the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), growing powerhouses that are no longer mere reservoirs of inexpensive labour or promising markets but also breeding grounds for increasingly competitive global companies. Some observers may continue to believe that the Americans with their business schools still hold the keys to good management but they do this out of habit and often ignorance. Economic power has changed places and it is likely that the dominant American vision of the world is not going to last very long. Effective management practices are increasingly at odds with American standards, and the rising power of countries with different traditions means that there is a growing variety of ways in which efficiency can be achieved. Instead of thinking that everyone must fit the same mould, we should try instead to benefit from our differences.

Morocco is sufficiently different from us for this to happen, yet close enough for useful exchanges to be possible. It has also engaged in an astonishing economic dynamic translating, among other things, into a proliferation of large infrastructure projects across the whole of the country. OCP is not the only example of this renaissance. Much has been written about the 2011 Arab Spring with its calls for greater democracy but there is just as much to say about Morocco’s economic spring. This dynamic is bringing home increasing numbers of Moroccans who had originally left the country to pursue their studies in leading French and American universities. They are returning because they think they are well situated to implement plans that are both fascinating and useful to their homeland. Given their advanced education, the problems they face will spur them on to even higher performance. And since many of them are familiar with (and appreciative of) our culture, we have much to learn from them and from the innovation logic driving them forward.