

MURIELLE MACHIELS

Good leadership during major



After graduating at SBS-EM twenty years ago, Murielle Machiels started her career in very different sectors.

CV Express

1998

Graduates from SBS-EM in Business and starts career at consumer goods multinational Procter & Gamble

2002

Becomes marketing manager at healthcare company Novartis

2011

Begins digital transformation of educational publisher Plantyn as new general manager, after climbing up through the company's ranks since 2005

2017

Founds her own company, QiLi, to help senior business leaders with complex business transformations

2018

Shares her expertise at SBS-EM, as Academic Director "Leading authentically in digital times"

When Murielle Machiels started, she wanted to learn and prove herself. Now she's convinced that the most important thing is to lead with both your head and your heart. "There is too much pain in companies at the moment." To spread this message to other business leaders, she established the company QiLi.

Murielle Machiels received widespread recognition for the way she guided educational publisher Plantyn into the digital age. With QiLi, she now assists other business leaders to achieve similar comprehensive reforms in their companies, offering advice on innovative methods such as the ontological approach. But after graduating at SBS-EM twenty years ago, Machiels started her career in very different sectors. Her first job was in the sales department of consumer goods multinational Procter & Gamble (P&G).

Finding the right corporate culture

"I learned a lot at P&G, as I had the chance to take up different positions during the three years I worked there," says Machiels. "But the corporate culture was too competitive for me and didn't leave me enough room for creativity." After a short stint at pharmaceutical company Sanofi, Machiels moved to healthcare business Novartis. An important factor in this decision was the fact that she had recently become a mother and wanted to work slightly less and closer to home. "I had a fun and interesting time at Novartis but became disappointed with the company's values. Back then, the business goals revolved too much around making profit and too little around healing people." Her stay at Novartis came to an abrupt end after Machiels became a mother for the second time and wanted to exercise her right to parental leave (see box). Her choice to

subsequently make a career switch to Plantyn was strongly influenced by the fact that she felt the job was more in line with her values. "A friend warned me that I was taking a step backwards, but I was convinced of the need to have more of a social purpose in my work, and the education sector seemed a perfect match."

Reforms for new momentum

This change of direction did indeed put Machiels on the right track, as she steadily moved up through the hierarchy and finally ended up at the head of the publishing firm in 2011. However, she faced a lot of challenges, as the company needed far-reaching reforms to adjust to the digital revolution while at the same time the shareholders were pushing for a rise in profits. "A common solution in such cases is to cut jobs, but that's not my style and furthermore it only brings short-term results," explains Machiels. Instead, she tried to optimise the company's efficiency by reducing costs and discontinuing non-viable activities, and by means of the promotion strategy. These 'traditional' methods had some positive effect, but

transformations

Text: Andy Furniere
Pictures: Laetizia Bazzoni



a deeper change was needed to give the publisher new momentum. Instead of focusing on creating thick books with lots of background for teachers, the publisher needed to concentrate on improving the working experience of teachers – and the learning experience of students.

A great deal of attention was paid to reducing red tape for teachers, adapting to students' individual needs and making lessons more interactive. Integrating digital tools was essential, so Plantyn took over the software company Informat and worked intensively with the Smartschool platform – streamlining the communication between students, teachers and parents. At the same time, Plantyn had to adjust its working procedures to cope with the demands of a rapidly changing market. The staff had to develop new skills and were also asked to take more decisions themselves so that new strategies could be implemented more quickly.

Holistic approach

Such key transformations create a lot of uncertainty and lead to a lot of stress, a 'perfect' recipe for burn-out. Machiels herself was close to reaching that stage. "I came to the point where I had to decide to either continue as usual and risk burn-out, change jobs or deal with the situation in a different way."

- Ingest 1998
- Founder of company QiLi and Academic Director "Leading authentically in digital times" at SBS-EM

To achieve this third option, she followed a course in 'ontological coaching' at the Newfield Network school in the US. This method helps to analyse issues in a holistic way and be more aware of the influence of your body and emotions on your behaviour – including your professional behaviour.

"In many situations, your body automatically reacts to a problem, which has an impact on your emotions and thus →

Driven by VALUES

"I think it's a constant factor in my career that I'm driven by my values," says Machiels. That mindset was severely tested early on in her career, when working at healthcare company Novartis. When she was pregnant with her second child, she wanted to ask for parental leave and work a little less. Because the corporate culture – at the time, it is important to note – denounced parental leave, she covered herself legally before talking to her boss. Her assumptions were confirmed, as she was fired soon after making her request known. She successfully sued the company. "They knew it's a legal right for mothers to have parental leave, but they wouldn't give in, so as to deter other staff. I think it's essential to keep fighting such unfair treatment of mothers, who are in a vulnerable position."



“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO LEAD WITH BOTH YOUR HEAD AND YOUR HEART”

Changing LEADERS' HABITS

QiLi's online QiLeader course aims to transform the mindset and habits of leaders so that they have a greater impact in our fast-changing digital times, while also improving their peace of mind. "Many leaders still use business techniques and leadership habits that were designed in slower times," says Machiels. "As a result, they work increasingly harder and start sacrificing too much, but it's never enough to reach the desired results." For example, the course teaches leaders to look at issues in different way, to find solutions. The music industry, for instance, wasted a lot of time battling the illegal copying of CDs, before realising that customers are willing to pay for music when they can obtain it in a more accessible way, such as via a streaming platform. The course also deals with the management of anxiety and energy, obtaining a clear focus in a chaotic situation and efficient power sharing.

 www.qileader.com

also on your thinking process," Machiels explains. Through different exercises, for example saying 'no' to a fellow student while observing their body language and feelings during this action, she identified her 'automatic behaviours' – in particular under stress. She realised amongst other things that pressure could make her become dominant. "Most of our emotions and behaviours protect our ego, they don't prepare us for success or happiness." On the basis of these insights, she learned to 're-programme' her brain for success and focus on empowerment and shared leadership – crucial in digital times. This experience helped her to take better strategic decisions at Plantyn but also to improve the well-being of her staff. She set up a 'happiness programme' that amongst other things encouraged people to work less in the evenings, offered free massages for staff and promoted healthy eating habits. "These measures were initially met with a lot of scepticism but were gradually appreciated, after we set the example with the management team." When she left Plantyn at the end of 2016, the turnover and profit of the company was increasing and sick leave among staff was decreasing. The publisher's good reputation was restored, thanks to the digital innovations.

Energetic leadership

So why did Machiels leave Plantyn, when things were finally going better? "I didn't always feel comfortable with the pressure from shareholders, who are mostly concerned about short-term profits," she explains. "Plus I wanted more time for myself and my family." Machiels even bought a small holiday home in a village in the south of Spain, where she can escape the rat race. Still, she also wanted to share her experience with other business leaders, through her own company. She founded an enterprise under the name QiLi, with 'Qi' referring to the Chinese word for 'energy' and 'Li' referring to 'leadership'.



"The goal is to help business leaders facing major changes to adapt serenely to our rapidly changing digital times." She also draws lessons from her own mistakes at Plantyn, showing how it can be counterproductive to try to control everything and emphasising the importance of listening carefully to your staff. The biggest component of QiLi's service is an online course (see box), which includes various modules full of practical advice and several interactive features. Machiels also leads workshops, gives lectures and does consultancy work. Her approach attracted the attention of SBS-EM, which asked Machiels to share her expertise in order to further enrich its education programme. As Academic Director "Leading authentically in digital times", amongst other things Machiels looks at how online courses such as her own can be integrated into SBS-EM's services for students and the whole business community. ■

If you'd like to suggest an alumnus or alumna or present your project in this section, write to us at sbs-em@elixis.be.