



INTUITION



COURAGE



EMPATHY

HEART LEADERSHIP CASE STUDY #7

Creating a business to serve people

"My decision to take over the Vapodil project went quite against the grain of traditional decision-making: what I did was to trust my intuition. For 20 years I've managed the company in the same way, leading me to overturn all the usual codes of marketing and management. It is people who are the central focus of each of my decisions."



Odile Ehrbar
CEO of Adaxo



SECTOR

**Janitorial
equipment
industry**

**Small family
business
created
in 2004**

NUMBER OF
EMPLOYEES:

**7 in 2024, 60
advisors and
partners**

Sales revenue:

**€3.2 MILLION
IN 2023**

CASE STUDY'S
STRATEGIC DOMAIN:

**Creation of a
contributory
business**

The decision-making framework

► The company

Adaxo was founded by Odile Ehrbar in October 2004. For 20 years, the company has been marketing a cleaning appliance, the Vapodil© steam cleaner, which uses dry steam to **revolutionize the world of cleaning**, on any kind of surface, with no chemical consumables. The company is self-financing and Odile is the sole shareholder.

Its mission: to be a company in the service of people. In concrete terms, this involves making the chore of cleaning less onerous thanks to a technological innovation, eliminating the health risks for people, and reducing the environmental impact.

► The context

Managing director of a large US IT company, Odile came to realize at the age of 40 that she no longer wanted to work in an organization where **people were slaves to figures on a spreadsheet**, where the financial objectives alone guided the decision making.

This model of **"always more"** creates too much human carnage and makes no sense. This is why she decided, in 2002, to **hand in her notice** in order to pursue an aspiration that she had fostered since her youth: creating her own business.

She planned for her departure and alerted her management two years in advance. She was able to negotiate training on business management for herself.



What Odile Ehrbar had to ask herself

Am I ready to leave a financially comfortable post in order to start out again from scratch? How do I create a prosperous business that is not based on economic performance alone? How can figures work for people and not the other way round?



The decision

After leaving her job in 2004, Odile give herself one year to create an entrepreneurial project in her own image with a **concrete product, on a human scale, and independent of any shareholder pressure**.

Odile was studying three files of SMEs for takeover in France when she met, in May 2004, a Luxembourg entrepreneur who had filed a patent for a device producing dry steam. Having focused on the technical aspects of the innovation, he did not have the time to bring his invention to market. He wanted to pass on the reins so that he could take his retirement.

After four hours of discussion, Odile decided to purchase his goodwill and his patents. She was **won over by the energy and the dream of this boss**: to market the first dry steam cleaner. She created the Vapodil brand in October 2004.

The decision-making process



▶ What came out of the decision

To arrive at her decision, Odile considered the question of meaning in terms of human progress and impact on the environment. She based her reflections on her intuition and on the advice of two mentors, who set her the challenge.

Odile also committed to paper what she **no longer wanted**: *“Being accountable to financiers, managing hundreds of employees, selling nothing more than the provision of a service.”*

“I studied other takeover projects with business plan, market study, economic analysis; but I chose this Vapodil project, against the grain of traditional decision-making, by listening to my heart, my intuition.”



▶ The decision-making criteria

- Creating a **contributory business**.
- Selling a **concrete** product that has **meaning** in terms of human progress.
- Exploring a new form of management that is less rigid and less hierarchical.
- A **well-remunerated value chain**.
- **Basing the business in Strasbourg**, her hometown.



▶ The difficulties encountered

My total trust in human nature made me forget just how dogged the traditional stakeholders in the **chemical industry** could be in protecting their own interests. They placed obstacles in the path of the development of the Vapodil.

Creating **desirability** around how cleaning is done was no easy endeavor. We had to renounce the traditional techniques of marketing and communication and focus on the successful experiences of the customers. People have always been at the center of the project.

The results of the decision

▶ Economic results

The company is profitable.

The model is innovative through its patented technology as well as through its marketing and sales techniques. Indeed, sales are based wholly on the successful experience of customers who then become ambassadors for the company. Today, around 60 freelancers and hygiene professionals, convinced by the merits of the product, are paid through the sale of Vapodil equipment.

The model is also agile in terms of the predominance of self-financing, made possible by the healthy profitability of the company.

▶ Corporate reputation and appeal

The company's reputation and sales are based entirely on its customers, who are the best ambassadors for Vapodil.

Word-of-mouth serves as an efficient vector for transmitting lived experiences.

Odile is today called upon by companies specialized in cleaning services, which want to change their cleaning model and train their employees in the use of the Vapodil.

▶ Unexpected benefits of the decision

After identifying a significant drop in sick leave for cleaning workers in a particular hotel, CARSAT – the French retirement insurance and occupational health fund – decided to add Vapodil® to its approved list, because it reduces drudgery and the risk of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs).

AFPRAL (French association for the prevention of allergies) has also endorsed the Vapodil® solution, in light of the reduction in allergies communicated by customers.

Several Parisian hotels wanted to equip themselves with Vapodil for the Olympic Games, as they are under strong pressure to reduce waste and water consumption.