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THE VEOLIA CAMPUSES : A TRAINING VISION WHICH HAS BECOME REALITY

by

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Overview

In an attempt to make its core business areas of waste disposal, cleaning, and boiler maintenance more attractive, and to improve its practices, the Veolia group initiated an intensive in-house training programme in the mid 1990s with the aim of awarding officially recognised degrees. Veolia's first campus was near Paris. The construction of this site was accompanied by implementing the necessary working arrangements as approved by the French national education system, and enabled its founders to overcome internal resistance. Because of successful results from this first site, Veolia decided to expand this operation, and created campuses in other French regions, and even tried to establish training centres abroad, near its foreign subsidiaries. Owing to the diversity of educational cultures and educational systems in different countries, the Veolia Campus company management had to identify the nature of its operation extremely precisely, and to be clear about the degree of freedom it intended to give local, on-site campus managers. Today there are eighteen Veolia campuses throughout the world. This whole process demonstrates the relevance of this approach and the ability of a programme based in France to become a major asset to the group, and to enhance its global presence.

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TALK : Hilaire de Chergé

The Veolia group has existed in various forms for 150 years. It was initially known as the Compagnie générale des eaux, then Vivendi Environnement, and finally Veolia Environnement in 2002. Its activities are centred on services provided to public authorities and business clients. Today these business activities are classified in the environmental sector. They include water distribution, sanitation, energy production (heating), waste management and public transport. The group has more than three hundred thousand employees, one-third of whom work in France, and two-thirds abroad. Most of its international activity began in the 1990s and has accelerated over the past decade. Today the group is present in seventy-two countries.

I had already worked for Veolia in France, Great Britain and Germany. In 2005, I was appointed executive managing director of Veolia Campus, a professional training subsidiary of the group. I reported to Christian Dapilly, the assistant director of human resources for the group, and the founder of Veolia Campus. One of the main objectives I was given was to develop the campus abroad. I based my work on what already existed in France for the past ten years. Firstly, I will outline the beginnings of this subsidiary, the adjustments required from both managers and employees, and the Campus's success in France, before explaining the way in which we succeeded in spreading its know-how widely.

Henri Proglío's bold vision

At the start of the 1990s, the group experienced recruitment difficulties in its core business activities. Applicants to the group were mainly those who had been made unemployed. Initial analysis shows that the lack of attractive, prospective candidates was due to the poor image of the activities carried out by our group, rather than the lack of overall interest in these activities. It is true that uninspiring job titles such as dustman, cleaning lady, sewage maintenance worker and boiler man conceal a large number of jobs in the waste sector, industrial cleaning and energy services which often require qualifications and knowledge of sophisticated machines as well as the ability to make numerous decisions on the spot. This analysis also emphasised the fact that neither the French education system nor the state system of professional training had taken these activities into consideration. In fact, only two short study courses about collective heating systems existed, there are virtually no courses about sanitation, and there is absolutely nothing about transport and waste collection.

Veolia's president at the time, Henri Proglío, realised the implications that this situation had on the group's ability to carry out its undertakings correctly when legal responsibilities were continuing to weigh down the group. He decided to make a large investment in training. His project was to create a training centre which was capable of providing comprehensive courses in our core business activities, as well as giving officially recognised degrees to those who successfully completed their studies. In order to demonstrate in the clearest possible way the project's strategic goals and long-term nature, Henri Proglío decided to construct a campus with all the necessary features to ensure that employees – or future employees – could complete a degree course over a long period of time, with work-based training in agreeable living conditions. The total investment, spread over time, was close to fifty million Euros (the equivalent of three hundred million Francs at the time), a substantial amount which was testimony to the scale of Proglío's vision.

Overcoming internal resistance

Naturally, this innovative vision met with heated resistance both inside and outside the company.

Inside the company

Originally, several managers of the group's important subsidiaries strongly rejected the idea. They felt that they knew how to make their companies succeed within the existing training conditions. Even though these training conditions were very limited, the managers said that they were appropriate given the low levels of qualification, and had the advantage of costing virtually nothing. They also argued that their employees, once they had their degrees, would have salary expectations which would endanger the profitability of their business unit. Finally, they declared that training was not Veolia's core activity, and that the group would spread itself too thin. In order to overcome this resistance, Henri Proglio had to demonstrate his authority.

Outside the company

The president's initiative met with opposition from outside the group as well. It was clear that the aspiration within a private company to develop in-house training, with degrees awarded on successful completion of courses, disturbed people even though several public bodies, such as the Île-de-France regional council, and the Versailles Chamber of Commerce and Industry, all recognised the advantages such a scheme presented for general economic development, and were staunch supporters and partners of the project from the very beginning. Numerous discussions with all the institutions concerned took place, and concessions were made to accept small changes. This enabled Veolia to incorporate this idea into some existing schemes such as the apprentice training centres (CFA : centres de formations des apprentis) and work-based training. It also allowed the project to be accepted while collaborating with the French education system, several new universities and the French national employment agency (ANPE), to mention just a few. Later on, at the beginning of the 2000s, we were also one of the companies to show our support for the new law on the development of lifelong skills, and the Validation of Learning Through Experience programme (VAE : Valorisation des acquis de l'expérience).

The success of the French campuses

The first Veolia campus was built near Cergy-Pontoise, fifty kilometres from Paris. It welcomed its first work-based training apprentices in 1994. During the years which followed, about fifteen degree-based courses were created, most of which were set at the level of vocational training certificates (CAP : certificat d'aptitude professionnelle) and technical education certificates (BEP : brevet d'enseignement professionnel). These courses included studies about waste collection, cleaning, and so on. Short, non-degree courses were introduced in 1996 to satisfy more specific needs for continuous education for adults. During the 2000s, courses at the level of the Baccalauréat level (and other certificates), as well as at the level of the BA and MA, were established with new partners such as the ESSEC business school and the AFPA association for professional training for adults.

In the middle of the 2000s, the French campuses trained on average about six hundred apprentices per year, welcomed fifteen thousand people for training periods of varying lengths, and delivered more than two hundred thousand hours of teaching. Veolia Campus, the company to which the French campuses were attached, had a turnover of thirty million Euros. This success confirmed our original objective. The considerable investment in in-house training improved the image of our activities, and therefore helped our recruitment, even though sometimes it still remains difficult.

Contrary to the concerns of many people, this operation has encouraged staff loyalty. This is demonstrated by the fact that Veolia employees who have studied in these training centres and whose skills have been officially recognised, are generally very satisfied with this programme and feel grateful to the company. As a result, having received their degrees, most of them do not instantly decide to look for employment outside the company. Instead, their natural reaction is to put their new knowledge into practice as quickly as possible, and to request additional training at some time in the future.

As predicted and forecast in the budget, employees requested and obtained salary increases which corresponded to their newly acquired skills. However, this has not undermined the group's economic performances or its vitality. On the one hand, improvements in the quality of work as a result of an increase in skills and motivation have resulted in savings. On the other hand, it has enabled Veolia to raise the quality of its work beyond market standards, thereby helping Veolia's competitive position and its ability to obtain new contracts.

Finally, the development of these campuses has become an important factor for unity in the company, and has facilitated social relations within Veolia because it is a source of pride for almost all the staff and trade unionists.

Wide distribution and local culture

The evident success of the French campuses after the beginning of the 2000s was a strong, motivating reason for the group to extend its operations abroad, and create equivalent training institutions in each country where Veolia has an important presence. However, this quickly proved not to be as easy as it might seem. Because I was aware of efforts which had already been undertaken in this field, I quickly realised that cultural factors as well as legal and organisational structures specific to each country represented major obstacles. For example, the Americans could not understand why a company would be in charge of its own initial training. Our first meeting was a disaster : all the arguments fell on deaf ears, and no-one understood the other person's position. The Germans, on the other hand, understood our idea straightaway because it was similar to their work-based training programmes, but they considered that their educational system already produced operational training schemes which Veolia did not have. The English were instantly enthusiastic about our idea, but misinterpreted it from the very beginning : they created what in the business world is known as a 'corporate university', in other words, a luxurious institution which enables deserving executives in the company (such as managers, senior executives, and new recruits with 'high potential') to meet at various seminars given by celebrities from time to time.

This type of experience generated a great deal of energy in terms of discussions and explanations for a result which was likely to be uncertain. We had to find a way of conveying our vision more efficiently. I tried to identify a few fundamental ideas relating to our training principles which could act as a benchmark for local projects, giving each country the freedom to apply them in accordance with their national customs. This meant that ideas had to be easily understood, and people everywhere – in other words, in places as different as Rabat (Morocco), Shanghai (China) and Melbourne (Australia) – would agree to them. My team and I went through all the principles of the French campus, and picked seven principles which we judged could be applied everywhere : four were about education and three were about governance.

Four principles about education

On an educational level, we decided that training ought to be an opportunity available to everyone, and to be seen as a joint investment by the employee and the employer, in order to acquire knowledge. It was hoped that training should be taught ideally by experienced Veolia employees.

An opportunity available for everyone

A Veolia employee (or a candidate who is intending to join the group) ought to have access to training regardless of his age, level of initial training, or length of service in the company. The original request for training should come from either the employer or the employee. In practical terms, respecting the principle of joint investment below implies that the request has been made by common agreement.

A joint investment

Training is a joint investment between the employee and the company which should result in mutual recognition. Therefore, the employee should not see it as a constraint, even less so as a punishment or as a regulatory obligation by the people in charge. As far as the Veolia campuses and their teachers are concerned, training should not be seen as an opportunity simply to give out knowledge, but care should be taken about adapting teaching to students and helping them to progress.

The acquisition of know-how and autonomy

In view of the practical nature of our activities, training aims to enable our employees to acquire autonomy when carrying out work. Therefore, it should provide the elements of general knowledge which are essential to each activity, and also to concentrate on the know-how as well as the human capability to manage oneself on the job. For example, training should teach students to take decisions, co-operate with other employees and management, and recognise the moment when one can handle a problem alone as well as when one needs help from others. To achieve this, we need teaching staff and instructors who have experience. The fourth principle makes this very clear.

In-house Veolia instructors

It is obvious that experience is best found in people who are professionally active. It is the duty of the operational subsidiaries of Veolia to encourage its best employees to be part of the in-house teaching staff. In practice, this is quite simple because experienced employees readily criticise the training which they once received and so are very happy to be able to train people in ways which they see fit and which are relevant.

Three principles about governance

Three ideas were put forward regarding governance : inclusion of managers of local subsidiaries onto the board of directors ; the physical construction of Veolia's own facilities and equipment ; and the creation of an educational committee.

Inclusion of local managers on the board of directors

Veolia Campus' central objective is to provide services to its subsidiaries. It is considered that this is best achieved if managers of the local subsidiaries sit on the campuses' boards of directors. In view of the different concerns which local managers may have with regard to the usefulness of training and its need within the company, they are sometimes difficult to convince...but we succeed !

Creation of an educational committee

In order both to adapt training in the best way possible, and to give advice to staff who enrol in the programme and those who come to the campus to teach, each campus ought to have an educational committee. This should be composed of representatives from each of the group's activities, members of the human resources department, and possibly members of external educational institutions with which the committee has contact.

Physical construction of buildings

Because the aim of the campuses is to demonstrate the importance Veolia gives to providing training for its employees, we think the company should possess its own buildings and facilities, or at least some of them. This is also a way in which we can more easily adapt the training we offer to our specific needs. Because financing is not provided 100 % by the

central body of Veolia Campus and requires funding from local subsidiaries, we must convince their managers about the advantages generated by this approach (which we consider to be a legitimate constraint), and ask all our external partners and financiers to support the campus.

Global – but contrasted – success

These principles have given momentum to the expansion of campuses abroad, even though this has taken place in different ways. The Czechs, for example, adapted very well to our project, and implemented it without any major difficulty, probably thanks to a strong culture linked to our business activities which made them more receptive to our approach. It is not proving to be so easy with the Americans : we have only managed to set up campuses in a few territorial zones (such as Chicago and Indianapolis) which are already accustomed to this sort of in-house training provided by the few American companies which do the same, such as McDonald's and Lilly. In Germany, we still have not found a solution. In total, between 2005 and 2009, we opened eighteen training centres of which about ten are now running smoothly. In 2009, Veolia Campus provided more than one million hours of training. Three heads of state and about twelve ministers from various countries have come to see for themselves the quality and the advantages of our training model and in so doing have contributed to the positive image of our project.

Sometimes our success has been even greater than we had hoped. This is true of the British example. After an unsuccessful start (which I mentioned earlier), the whole situation changed for the better.

The stunning British development

Having created a corporate university which was not what we asked of our British counterparts, we appointed an English project manager and suggested that he began by spending some time on the original French campus so that he could see our idea at first hand. When he was back in England, he attempted to find the appropriate person in the British government capable of assisting the project. One day, in the beginning of 2006, he telephoned me to say that he was with a certain Mrs. Chadwick who was in charge of the Learning Skills Council, an administration within the ministry of Education, which was created only a few years earlier by Tony Blair to handle technical training. This sector had been completely disregarded in Great Britain over the past twenty years to the point of having almost completely disappeared, and she suggested that we should meet very soon so that we could explain our vision to her. Four days later, she spent a day-and-a-half with us, seeing what we did and understanding the importance that we gave to our activity. At the end of her visit, she made a speech, a couple of minutes long, in which she brilliantly summarised what she had seen. She reiterated her interest in our project, and told us that she had a relatively large budget at her disposal to introduce this sort of training. Two months later, she launched an apprenticeship programme which fitted in well with British culture. If we decided to take part in this programme, she was ready to finance our project with more than £1 million per annum. With this cash injection, our project took on a scale which in some ways exceeded that of our activity in France. As a result, nearly 10 % of our employees in Great Britain were able to have their skills recognised by being awarded a degree by the National Vocational Qualifications programme (the British equivalent of the VAE). In 2009, more than two hundred apprentices received work-based training and were awarded their degrees by Gordon Brown, the British Prime Minister at that time.

DISCUSSION

Question : *Were you the only company to have received financial support from the British government ?*

Hilaire de Chergé : No. McDonald's was awarded money at the same time as we were. Mrs. Chadwick's aim was to relaunch professional training on a broad scale. She hoped that she could rely on all of the companies which were prepared to move in this direction. Initially there were only a few, but now there are more.

Q. : *Do you regret that you were not able to open a campus in Germany despite the fact that the efficient nature of the German technical training system would have made it superfluous. Is the aim to open campuses in every country ?*

H. de C. : I emphasised in my talk that, on the whole, our French employees were extremely proud of what Veolia accomplished on its campuses. This pride is shared throughout the world. It has become the group's trademark which we use in our publicity. The fact that there are no campuses in Germany makes our employees in that country feel neglected, even though they realise that it is to the credit of their country.

Initial openings

Q. : *How much time elapsed between the launch of the idea by the president, Henri Proglio, and the opening of the first campus ?*

H. de C. : The entire operation took about three years. This starts with the moment the original team put the vision down on paper, to the completion of the building project, to finding the relevant people in the ministries and professional bodies, and to the establishment of the first degree courses, and the creation of educational partnerships.

Q. : *How was your idea viewed by the professional sectors ?*

H. de C. : Very well because it promoted their activities, but it still took some time before this was completely understood.

Q. : *Are you still opening campuses in France ?*

H. de C. : Yes. Over the past few years, we have opened five campuses (near Lille, Lyon, Tarbes, in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region, and in the West region), as well as the Île-de-France region campus at Jouy-le-Moutier. Now that the principle is well known and accepted by most people and institutions concerned, it is relatively easy to set up a campus when there is an obvious need. Sometimes there is some difficulty in replicating the financing methods as some regional councils are more reticent than others.

The extension of the training courses and their assessment

Q. : *In view of the French problem of socially integrating people who do not have degrees and lack a professional direction, your training and qualification initiative with regard to activities which often deter more socially integrated people is raising interest. Do you work with companies specialising in professional work integration in order to recruit your apprentices ?*

H. de C. : To meet our recruitment needs and despite the efforts we make to improve our image, our activities are not recognised by the general public so that we often have to recruit people who have not been able to find a job elsewhere. The apprentice who studies for a vocational training certificate with us is on average about twenty years old, and it may be the second time he is doing vocational training because after the first training he did not get a job.

Sometimes we have students who are trying for their third vocational training certificate. Some of these people have passed through other work related organisations which have helped them reach a certain level of discipline in daily life (such as being on time, presenting themselves well, and so on), and which makes them capable of fitting into our systems, and enables them to appreciate the prospect of an open-ended contract. We have a good working relationship with the EPID (Établissement public d'insertion de la Défense), the French ministry of Defence body for the professional placement of young people, which sends people every year, and also with the 'Second chance schools', which are schools which fall under the European initiative created by Edith Cresson to ensure that all young people have a certain level of secondary education. Many local bodies and associations for professional placement also regularly send us candidates.

Q. : *Have you created training programmes for managers ?*

H. de C. : We have a seminar for managers and specific management paths chosen for our executives. I do not think that we are particularly original in this respect compared to other large companies. In addition to their aim of teaching students, these training courses also have the advantage of allowing senior executives in the company to get to know the campuses from the inside, and to appreciate them.

Q. : *Is the company's entire permanent training now provided in the campus programmes ?*

H. de C. : No, and in fact this is not one of our objectives. The campuses receive about one-third of the total budget for training in the company.

Q. : *Since you award degrees which are officially recognised, it would be logical for you to also provide training programmes for people who are neither members of Veolia nor employed for their work-based training by Veolia. Do you do this ?*

H. de C. : In France, the fact that we are recognised by the State means we have to open our training to those outside the company. In practice, this rarely happens because the available places (of which there are too few) are quickly taken by our own employees. Having said this, our competitors are not particularly forthcoming in their requests to join our programmes. Abroad we sometimes train the staff of some of our service providers.

Q. : *Some important companies which have built up their own powerful in-house training systems are very proud of their employees who subsequently leave their company to find employment elsewhere. Danone maintains a network of ex-employees. Michelin uses it as a pretext for publicising the quality of its training. What is your opinion about this ?*

H. de C. : This was not part of our culture until now. For the time being, our main preoccupation is to train our staff to improve our activity. Therefore, we have not implemented any particular policy in order to benefit from this type of situation.

Q. : *How does Veolia assess the performance and the benefits of its system ?*

H. de C. : On a formal level, we use the usual methods of assessment by questioning people straight after their training to find out if they appreciated it. We also keep a tally on the number of degrees awarded. The organisation of governance which integrates managers of subsidiaries enables us to formulate a very direct 'business' assessment because they spontaneously tell us whether they are satisfied or not. They are also sufficiently senior to stop a training course if they want to.

Conviction, practice and theory

Q. : *This project brings into play all sorts of elements, such as the subjects to be taught, teaching skills, equipment, relations with local cultures and existing teaching institutions, the way in which the campuses are integrated within the Veolia group, and so on. Did the people who spearheaded the project of the campuses, yourself, your predecessors and those in the company's general management who started it and monitored it, concentrate on a theoretical vision, or did they develop the project as they went along, progressing and solving problems on the way ?*

H. de C. : I do not really understand what you mean by a theoretical vision.

Q. : *It is an all-encompassing idea which identifies all the elements and makes rational links between them. It is a sort of architect's plan of ideas.*

H. de C. : To start with, Henri Proglio had a very strong vision regarding some factors which he said could not be ignored. These included promoting the group's activities, and the level of commitment of managerial staff to their subsidiaries. Was this vision the result of a mature and well-developed thought process ? Yes, undoubtedly. Or a theoretical and rational thought process ? I do not think so. In my opinion, it was more the result of a sort of personal certainty guided by his experiences in the past of managing people. In any case, it produced an overall guideline. If one goes into the detail, multiple choices were made – as and when questions were asked – by relying on both the common sense of people who led the operations and on theoretical knowledge. The classification of degrees, life-long training and training courses established by university specialists which have given a good return on investment was also taken into account. Over the years, friction between these various sources and changes made between them created a very tight structure which was solidly linked to the French training system. This gave it a great deal of strength.

Q. : *But this meant that Veolia's training system was fundamentally French, and therefore it was clearly not easy to apply across the board.*

H. de C. : In any case, this forced us to identify what was valid for our country and what was valid for every other country in our training programme. The principles which I have mentioned are the fruits of this work of deconstruction and reconstruction.

The 'hard', the 'soft' and broad diffusion

Q. : *Most of Veolia's core activities are technical, and call for a knowledge of physics or chemistry in every situation : for example, the laws of combustion of oil or coal for boilers, and the laws of hydraulics for water distribution networks. This is what I call 'hard knowledge', in other words it is independent of individuals and is applied according to precise, rigorous conditions. Normally every technician, regardless of his culture, knows this and accepts it. I think this is an important asset in your process of universalisation, or what I call 'broad diffusion'. Educational methods and practices, on the other hand, are part of what I call the 'soft knowledge' side, inasmuch as they are dependent broadly on culture : the French tend to grade and classify children according to a variety of criteria from a very young age such as primary school (or even nursery school), whereas the Swedes categorically refuse to do so before children are thirteen or fourteen years old. An individual from a given culture will only accept educational methods if they are sufficiently in line with what he is accustomed to.*

H. de C. : The distinction you make between 'hard' and 'soft' and their interaction with the 'wider picture' is similar to what we have experienced. We devised a room which showed students how hydraulic pressure works using various pipes and transparent valves. We reproduced this model all over the world in our campuses because our water system technicians could relate to it regardless of their national culture, because it represents very

well what happens in the real world. Having said this, we do not in any way impose a teaching method on a teacher. He is free to teach as he wishes. Some teachers prefer teaching by repetition ; others like to make students understand. Some rely on documents distributed to the entire class, whereas others create their own written back-ups.

Q. : *Have you been tempted to impose a teaching method ?*

H. de C. : No. In fact even in a homogenous cultural area such as France, we do not impose a method because we maintain the principle that the chief teachers are supposed to be the most experienced practitioners in the company. If we want to keep these people, we have to let them teach the way they want.

Q. : *Do you frequently ask Veolia employees who are close to retirement age to teach in your training courses ?*

H. de C. : Yes. Take the case of the Cergy-Pontoise campus : out of eighty full-time teachers, one quarter is very active. They are old staff who the company has kept on in view of early retirement. These people are happy to end their careers by passing on their experience.

Q. : *Who are the other teachers ?*

H. de C. : Some of them are from State education or from consultancies which we have recruited because they possess a specific skill which they can pass to our students, and some are relatively experienced executives (on average between 30 and 40 years old) who realise that this teaching opportunity is a way to develop their human relations skills which are necessary for the position of manager, and will subsequently be put into practice in operational jobs. We agree that teaching in itself is very good training for management.

Q. : *Has development overseas resulted in feedback on experiences which is useful for the French campuses ?*

H. de C. : Some foreign training centres have developed e-learning quickly because it was a technique which was already frequently used by the training institutions in their countries. We have drawn our inspiration from them. Others spontaneously apprehended training employees in the context of a programme for personal development. This helped us in our attempt to remove some of the emphasis which is present in French culture, and is undoubtedly excessive, about whether people have degrees or not. I think that the most important benefit of these foreign operations has been to highlight the essential reasons behind our project. This has made our position very clear, which is also useful in France.

Presentation of the speaker :

Hilaire de Chergé : graduate of Ecole Polytechnique, PhD. He is committed to the promotion and development of professional training. He managed Veolia Campus (Veolia's training centres) and is the national treasurer of Opcalia. He is a member of the executive committee of the European Club of Human Resources and of the Global Council of Corporate Universities (GlobalCCU).

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