

Finding a new model of organisation and management at Michelin

by

■ **Bertrand Ballarin** ■

Director, labour relations and empowerment, Michelin Group

Overview

After Michelin applied a rational quality programme to improve industrial performance called the 'Michelin Manufacturing Way', productivity greatly increased, but employees appeared to lack motivation. Workers and middle management felt confined by the constraints imposed. The Group launched a project to empower those involved in the company starting with the lower levels of employees and moving up the hierarchy to management. Bertrand Ballarin, who was in charge of this project, instigated an initial step which involved thirty-eight production units in eighteen Michelin factories. This phase produced credible results at the end of twelve months, after which five sites were asked to disseminate the experiences of the demonstrator production units, to oversee and to develop how support structures worked (assessing methods, analysing relations between hierarchical levels, and so on), and devise new managerial guidelines. Such procedures are revolutionary for Michelin which is gradually implementing them in a conservative way, while dealing with the inherent complexity common to very large companies, while still managing to preserve a corporate history which is more than a century old.

Report by François Boisivon • Translation by Rachel Marlin

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My background is in public service. I was educated at St Cyr military academy having studied in a literary preparatory school. Having graduated from Sciences Po Paris (in the public service department), I was an army officer for thirty years during which time I was part of the think-tank created to analyse the strategic outcomes of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

I joined Michelin in 2003, and started working in a factory in Clermont-Ferrand as project manager for organisational empowerment. This period helped me to learn how a tyre is made. Afterwards, I was put in charge of the Bourges factory for four years. Michelin wanted to close this factory. This is where I first developed my skills in the field of labour relations (in the beginning there were 1,200 employees, but by the end, there were 500: the factory still exists and is proud to be standing today). I was then sent for four years to improve industrial performance at our Shanghai factory which was a joint venture with the Chinese government. These two experiences enabled me to work firstly on techniques of industrial management and labour relations, and secondly on production systems and industrial performance. When I started to know how to manage a factory, I was sent to Clermont-Ferrand where I was in charge of personnel policies applied to the working population of the Group, in other words about 67,500 employees. I was also given the management of an empowerment project. At the same time, I was asked to analyse the transformation of the Michelin labour relations model which at the time was not formalised and was corporate. Jean-Dominique Senard, the Group's director, wanted to develop the model, and consequently I was put in charge of the Group's labour relations in July 2013.

Creating a strong social link between equals adapted to a strong identity

From our point of view, labour relations, far from being confined to a dialogue between social partners, extend to all relations in the human community which are created by the company. Our empowerment approach is embedded in a collective conception of responsibility and, if we succeed in our approach, it should be conveyed as a strong, professional, social bond between peers in our teams, whether they are assigned to manufacturing tasks or not (as opposed to banal social relations forged around the photocopier or the coffee machine).

Michelin, which was founded in 1889, was one of the first French companies to adopt the scientific organisation of labour after about 1919. This helps to explain the presence in Michelin of an industrial organisation department whose reputation is well known throughout the world. Despite the separation between implementing tasks on the one hand and designing tasks and resolving problems on the other, Michelin has sought to make sure since 1927 and its 'ideas of progress' philosophy, that those involved in the execution are well aware of the way in which the problem is resolved or how progress is made. Michelin adheres to a principle which Édouard Michelin (one of the founders) held dear, namely that 'those who do know exactly what they do'. Another paradox is that even though the factories were managed in a very strict way, the methods of operational management were hardly standardised. Each factory developed its own management system of performance and progress even though they all shared the same method, the Michelin 'continuous progress' approach. In the mid-1990s, this extreme decentralisation sometimes resulted in difficulties for the company which the executive management had to deal with.

Following an important phase of growth and international development in the second half of the 20th century, Michelin today employs 112,000 people, exports to 170 countries, and has 68 factories in 17 countries which mainly manufacture tyres, but also produce chemical elastomers and curing moulds, and various other products. Each year we manufacture approximately 184 million tyres which equip all sorts of vehicles, ranging from bicycles to aeroplanes as well as mining machines (whose tyres are four metres wide). We account for a little less than 14 % of the market in terms of value. The market includes three well-known companies (Goodyear, Bridgestone and Michelin) but the competition is most fierce between these three and a host of small, specialised manufacturers who are very aggressive in the sectors where they operate. Our turnover is almost 22 billion Euros, and we had an operating income of 2.6 billion Euros in 2015. Our major concern today is to continue our growth.

We are trying patiently and prudently to invent a model which is adapted to us, and which enables us to go beyond the limitations of the traditional system of management. We think that the practice of leading and controlling is still relevant, but the way in which it should be exercised should change, and, to a certain degree, should create empowerment on various levels. The managers, even if their roles change, should remain in place. Our aim is certainly not to cut out the need for production line management.

Empowerment is a process. When people are made aware of their responsibilities, they have a certain amount of power over their actions (the right to decide by themselves), and one does not dictate to them how to use the allocated resources responsibly. The process also holds people to account on decisions taken and their consequences. The essential complementarity of the words 'empowerment' and 'accountability' leads to what Paul Ricoeur calls 'responsibility-imputability'. Too often, the notion of 'empowerment' is translated or summed up by the word 'accountability'. We must be wary of diversions which make us be accountable without giving us the means to carry out the task or, on the contrary, giving these means without holding us to account. In a big, complicated organisation which is more than one hundred years old, neither one nor the other is obvious.

Correspondents and empowered organisation

The process of empowerment was started in the 1990s in some of our factories in Germany and the United States where managers were concerned about their levers of in-house competition and how they could improve their productivity. Post-war theories about high performance teams, autonomous teams and so on, which were already implemented on a large scale in France and abroad, had not been put into practice at Michelin. We advanced by trial and error, and arrived at the conclusion that it was better not to have production line management present all the time. We therefore decided that our supervisors who did shift-work should now only work during the daytime, whereas the manufacturing teams would continue to work around the clock keeping to the same shift system (with three eight-hour shifts). As a result, for two-thirds of a twenty-four-hour shift, one manufacturing unit – in other words, a batch of machines with interchanging teams working around the clock – would be working without any line management supervision.

In Germany, the number of managers who are directly in contact with blue-collar workers has decreased, and some manufacturing units have as many as one hundred people working on them with just one supervisor. Our American factories used the principle of the 'manufacturing professional' which consists of bringing skills into teams which then allows the team to solve any technical problems encountered by itself.

We recruited 'correspondents' who paid attention to safety, quality and flows. These correspondents were workers, like all the others, who worked on the same tasks, but who spent on average thirty minutes in an eight-hour shift solving different problems, creating an interface between the manufacturing teams, management and support services, and who, generally speaking, managed the team. It was a role, not a function, and it was not paid. We thought that the correspondents would be recognised for their career progression and their personal fulfilment emanating from the different social bond they established with their colleagues and management. We quickly realised that the correspondents were extraordinary workers, and that the 'breath of fresh air' we gave them in a succession of repetitive tasks at high speed, had very positive effects on their commitment, morals, motivation and the consideration they demonstrated for the company. As a result, Édouard Michelin very quickly suggested that we launch the project, and we started to formalise the idea of empowered organisational units.

We had very good results but with a difference between two populations: the correspondents (who found a real lever of commitment) and the others.

Autonomous management of performance and progress

Between 2004 and 2005, the Group's executive board discussed whether a corporate global production system should exist. Until 2010 or 2011, huge efforts had been made to implement an homogenous management system of performance and progress which could operate in all the countries where Michelin was present. We had never developed management tools like Toyota's *Kaizen* (continuous improvement) tool before.

We established our organisation, and then we adopted a ‘top-down’ approach. In 2011, we were delighted with an increase in productivity of 30% over the five previous years.

The new organisation was very rigid and standardised. We benefitted from the mechanical system in place, but it still lacked intelligence and humanity, something which some companies call ‘commitment’ and others ‘moral strength’. We were very proud of the good humour of workers in the workshop, but it became dulled, and the supervisors dissatisfied. Those in charge of the production units did not feel that they had any time for their team members. Consequently, the management asked that, despite its success, the ‘Michelin Manufacturing Way’ be improved and that the empowering organisation be updated. It was agreed that during a period of two years the company would try to reach the levels reached before the new production norms were introduced. Similarly, a review was launched to increase greatly empowerment in the units based on increased autonomy within the teams.

At this stage, only the factory workers were involved, not the other 40,000 Michelin employees whom we refer to as part of its ‘tertiary’ departments. This was the beginning of the Autonomous Management of Performance and Progress procedure (*Management Autonome de la Performance et du Progrès*, MAPP), in other words, the addition of the notion of autonomy to the management system we had just created. The first original aspect of our approach was the direct consultation of the workers. We asked thirty-eight manufacturing units in eighteen factories representing the entire range of our production, to consider how they would implement this autonomy by answering the following question: ‘When making a decision, what are you able to do without the intervention of supervisors, and, when solving problems, what are you able to do without depending on maintenance operators, regulators, technicians and other industrial organisers?’ One thousand five hundred people took part in this survey.

We visited each of the eighteen factories involved, and spent a long time with the management teams to make sure that they did not interfere with the experiment. The annual objectives of the demonstrator units were the only ones which were maintained. Validation would come from the resulting industrial performance (without any indicators being changed), and from the morale of the teams which we measure every year by means of a survey completed by all of our employees entitled ‘Moving forward together’. Our approach, even though performance is the most important factor, is not purely utilitarian. It is also a human approach and we insist upon it.

The factory scale and extension of the model to the tertiary departments

We did not try to make a catalogue of ‘good practices’, but to assess the degree of autonomy which an ordinary manufacturing unit can achieve. In December 2013, we presented our results to the executive committee. We thought that the emotion felt by the teams of workers was expressed to the management team when someone said ‘Here we have the means of becoming something that we had dreamed about, without achieving it completely.’ It was generally agreed that these experiences bore resemblance to the company. We still had to pursue them, and make them widely known on a scale of the site, in other words to the initial level where a true degree of autonomy is possible in all the functions necessary to an industrial human community (as in human relations, quality, technical issues, production, and so on).

We had five sites in France, Poland, Germany, Canada and the United States which were part of this approach on a local scale. However, this is not intended to be a fixed deployment project. It is far removed from the method of change management recommended by John Kotter¹ which involves a relentless system which consists traditionally of creating a feeling of urgency and danger, broadcasting this on a very large scale, trying to find advantages, and diffusing them. On the contrary, we think that if the experience is successful, it will spread naturally. Therefore, we asked the executive committee to give the sites time – four or five years – and we decided to protect them, not to make showcases of them, but to let them get to work and help them by encouraging their managers to think about the situation, without giving them the keys to the method. We wanted the people in charge of this new approach to undergo a truly personal transformation. Doing this voluntarily is the basis of this approach.

1. Professor, Harvard Business School.

There is always a risk that large differences will emerge between the empowered sites and a very centralised, prescriptive and bureaucratic Group structure. Therefore, we asked the executive committee to authorise a project from the 'secondary' departments and to extend it to all the Group's departments. This request was not implemented uniformly across the different units of activity at Michelin. Experimental workshops were launched with those which were favourable in non-industrial units (such as the agricultural tyres product line, the curing moulds line, the Group's IT department, and the personnel department). This extension to the tertiary departments allowed us to refine our model and to identify the main indicators. We know which are the important operational principles of the Michelin empowerment model which we presented ten days ago to the executive committee.

Empowerment is now one of the four avenues of progress for the Group. The other three are the transformation of our client service, simplification, and digitalisation. It was initially tested in our manufacturing activities, and was then adopted throughout the entire company. Michelin could be the first international, industrial company of its size to operate a model of empowerment not only with regard to execution, but also to that of corporate life and the governance of the Group.

Discussion



Advantages of demonstrator units

Question: *When you launched the experimental phase, you refused to allow the units to have any contact with each other so that their imagination could run wild, with no interference. What were the local initiatives which most struck the management committee? In the factories, would you like to change the way in which relationships between the different hierarchies work, the management assessment criteria, and some management tools like reporting?*

Bertrand Ballarin: In industry, the obsession with benchmarking remains: it is considered a waste of time to invent something which exists elsewhere. I do not share this point of view. We thought that if the thirty-eight demonstrator units were in contact with each other that they would end up modelling their own behaviour on each other. We lifted this ban after six months because the units had reached a level of maturity which allowed them to benefit rather than suffer from communication with each other.

We perfected an automated process for the curing of tyres for passenger vehicles. The loss amassed by raw materials, in other words materials used to make tyres, was significant. We had just one demonstrator unit which used this process and it was in a Canadian factory. Its raw material losses decreased by 30% compared to other units (which were not demonstrator units) using complex machines on assembly lines.

In Germany, we had one demonstrator unit which cut out sheets of metal before the 'raw' tyre was assembled. The factory also experimented with an automated manufacturing process (of tyres for heavy goods vehicles). The quantities produced and the production time, designed so that the machine was correctly supplied, were determined by a centralised office. However, these objectives were based on an historical average of production requirements where the variability at each calibration was very large. As a result, the machine lacked products. The teams working on the demonstrator unit started communicating with the assembly workshop, and the teams solved the problem themselves without the direct intervention of supervisors or planning technicians. They reorganised the order in which the cutting-out was done. One month later, production flows became regular once again.

We solved problems which resulted from the curing of some of our tyres by supplying the unit concerned with a checklist, not only for its own machines, but also for those of the assembly workshop which precedes it in the operations line. Once again, solutions were implemented without the intervention of supervisory staff.

We made significant gains regarding the overall equipment effectiveness (OEE). Our flows are complicated. One-third of our decrease in equipment effectiveness is due to time lost waiting for machines to be repaired, which people who have visited our workshops have seen with their own eyes.

In the factory, we encourage management teams and those in charge of the workshops to develop an empowerment approach, in this case to work with their hierarchical superior rather than give orders to their subordinates. We encourage managers to 'evacuate any decision-making' and leave this to their subordinates. This is the first change we should make in what we refer to as the 'structure'.

The second change is psychological or mental. We want this structure to be transformed from a prescription stance (where orders are given) to a development stance encouraging 'those who do' to solve their problems themselves. We ask our technicians to let their teams take decisions which they themselves would have normally taken. The production system, which was designed to avoid imponderables, paradoxically results in greater wait-times thereby wasting time which could be used instead for empowerment without affecting productivity. Because of Taiichi Ōno, the founder of the Toyota 'just in time' system, we know that one should never load a production unit to more than 80 % of its maximum capacity.

Keeping secrets and staying united

Q.: *In the 1950s at Clermont-Ferrand where I was in secondary school, people said that Michelin, a private, family-owned company, used its own metric system so that no-one could reveal its manufacturing processes, and trained its own engineers so that they did not defect to other companies. People said that corridors and employees were assigned colours: if a yellow employee was caught in a red corridor, he was fired. The explanations were technical. Rubber and tyres are not scientific objects, but are assembled, and, like gastronomy, they ought to be kept secret. When the President of France, General de Gaulle, came to Clermont-Ferrand, his visit took place under the company's strict surveillance. How did Michelin go from a draconian tyranny to an Athenian democracy, even though there are still some remains of the former as demonstrated by the ban on communication between demonstrator units? This reminds of another memory. People claimed that when there was a problem at Michelin, it was sent to three different teams, none of which knew that the other two had been consulted, and none ever knew which solution the management decided to take.*

B. B.: This ban on communication was temporary, and it was intended for the good of the company and its employees. We wanted to make sure the teams had as much creativity as possible. Four months after we banned communication between the units, we back-tracked and encouraged it. We put in place monthly video-conferences in which correspondents who could speak the languages used in all thirty-eight units took part. Two months later, we created an in-house network for those in the demonstrator units, and another network for this empowerment approach. From July onwards, we asked the unit staff to film their experiences for the end-of-year seminars.

I have only been working for Michelin for thirteen years. In other words, I am new. However, the identity of the company is still present. I use this lever in my empowerment approach. However, it can also be a source of suffering for some people who are faced with the necessary arbitration of modern governance.

Q.: *On my first day at Michelin, François Michelin welcomed the new recruits into the company. After a few minutes of silence, he asked 'Who invented the X tyre?' He then cited the name of a worker who was fed up of constantly hearing outside the factory that Michelin tyres got worn out too fast and were too expensive. This worker came up with the idea of adding a product to the rubber which would increase the tyre's resistance. This generated research which resulted in the invention of the radial tyre (or X tyre) in 1949. François Michelin liked repeating the saying 'Become what you are'. Engineers at Michelin began their career with a period spent in the workshop followed by work in the sales department. This approach was time-consuming, but guaranteed a solid corporate foundation. The Michelin, Puiseux, Durin and Rollier families who succeeded each other in jointly managing the company appeared very genuine. Once again, it was François Michelin who, when visiting a car fair, said that the car was merely 'an accessory of the tyre'!*

B. B.: When Édouard Michelin drowned at sea, I was in charge of the factory in Bourges, a city which had historically been an important centre for the manufacture of weapons, but had since become economically depressed. This

factory had been the largest in the Group, employing 4,300 people. The workers there knew the factory's fate because neither machines nor those taking retirement had been replaced. The trade unions had a strong presence there and were dominated by members from the French Revolutionary Communist League. Despite all this, when I announced that the CEO had died to the staff, people were in tears.

Q.: The day before his funeral, hundreds of people came early in the morning to the funeral chapel in Clermont-Ferrand to pay their respects.

Co-operation from trade unions and the morale of the supervisors

Q.: Did you include the trade unions in the empowerment process? How did you do it? To what extent do cultural differences between countries influence the process? Does the reluctance of supervisory staff dampen enthusiasm among blue-collar workers?

B. B.: When I presented the project to the three German factories in 2013, the secretary of the works council was present each time at the meeting with the management team. In the United States, there were no trade unions in the factories in question. In France, the trade unions did not show a great deal of interest because the job of 'correspondent' was not paid. This is no longer the case because we have asked the European works council to look into the system of recognition and career management which accompanies an increase in empowerment and integration within manufacturing teams of technical specialist workers. One of our five pilot factories in Puy-en-Velay (France), where the CGT trade union has a strong presence, integrated the trade unions into the monitoring committee.

The risks of stalemate in Michelin's tertiary departments can be averted by the method. Modestly, at every level we try to make people understand that they should leave certain decisions to their subordinates otherwise they will slow down the entire organisation because they do not have the time to take every decision. Each management level should define its 'reserved area' – a phrase coined by General de Gaulle – and keep to it. This area should be as small as possible. The rest becomes the decision space which naturally belongs to the lower hierarchy.

Q.: How have the maintenance staff and those in charge of quality control greeted this change?

B. B.: In different ways because the supervisors, workshop managers and quality technicians fear that we want to get rid of them. Once they are reassured, they become loyal. However, we also have to encourage them to focus on their work at hand which is to analyse machine failures, collect statistical data to enable fundamental progress, and not to deal with the most pressing issues when a dysfunction takes place. Commitment surveys, where the response rate is greater than 85%, generally showed a difference of about 15% between blue-collar and white-collar workers. In 2013, 81% of white-collar workers said they were satisfied, compared to 68% of blue-collar workers. In 2016, the satisfaction of blue-collar workers overtook that of white-collar workers: there was a slight decrease in white-collar satisfaction (80%), whereas blue-collar workers' satisfaction grew significantly to 81%.

Indicators of empowerment rather than a guide to practices

Q.: Is the corporate Michelin spirit the same in Shanghai as it is in Clermont-Ferrand?

B. B.: The Chinese are like the French. Of course, there are cultural differences, but I think that, like Simone Weil who devoted part of her book 'The Need for Roots' to this aspect, there are also vital needs of the human soul which do not change from a country where Michelin is present to another. Practices, however, are cultural, and we avoid describing our model with reference to a guide to practices. We prefer to identify indicators of empowerment. It is not important how we arrive at these indicators so long as they exist.

Q.: The higher one goes in a bureaucratic hierarchy, the greater the number of tasks which are not accomplished...

B. B.: When the manager ‘evacuates’ the decision-making activity, the team then knows that it must act autonomously. This is of course true for senior management teams. If we take away the need for validation from our hierarchical superiors, we do not isolate people who are faced with responsibilities; quite the contrary. The team stops being merely a juxtaposition of experts each of whom is dealing with his hierarchical superior, and instead becomes a group federated by its missions and objectives where its function to reflect reality, advise, and make sure a responsible individual is assumed by the group. Responsibility remains individual, but a ‘governmental’ form of solidarity (to continue the political metaphor) becomes established within the team. In this way, one can encourage managers to accept subsidiarity. The principles of the ‘reserved area’ and ‘collegiality’ make it possible to protect both the company and individuals.

Decision-making and digitalisation

Q.: *Could one define subsidiarity as delegating to those above oneself in the hierarchy rather than one’s subordinates? What is the place of digitalisation in the empowerment process?*

B. B.: We operate a form of delegation where subordinates may be accountable not to their direct superior, but a different superior on the same level. People in top management may be part of two teams: for example, my boss is both on the executive committee of the group and part of the personnel management. Technically I can decide certain things after discussion, but in some cases, my boss, even though he trusts me, cannot let me take these decisions without informing his peers, in this case, the executive committee. This is one of the criteria of the ‘reserved area’. The example is valid at all levels. Having said that, subsidiarity is new for us.

We have started a second wave of digitalisation in which empowerment constitutes an important challenge. Already in 1982, the historian Jacques Ellul wrote in his book ‘*Changer de révolution – L’inéluctable prolétariat*’ that microcomputers would be fantastic instruments to encourage freedom, association and mobilise intelligence, but the exact opposite took place as he noted in ‘*Le Bluff technologique*’ published a few years later. The first wave of digitalisation resulted in the surveillance of everyone. The importance of the new wave of digitalisation is precisely to do what it can be, namely an instrument which puts together intelligences, links them together, and lets them express themselves.

Encouraging interaction in a formal world

Q.: *Do you think that all the Michelin employees can play a part in the project? Will those who do not have the necessary ability to move find themselves marginalised? And will those who are not marginalised see their careers accelerate?*

B. B.: Few people – and even fewer, as you go up the hierarchy – were able to meet the expectations of the project because the way in which we work and the speed at which we work hardly encourage us to question how we interact with others. To help this interaction emerge, one must not set out rules, but identify the sources of impatience. Then one must help people who are trying to overcome reluctance with their own team, by trying to make those in the lower hierarchies react. People show their true capacities once a system settles down after it has been shaken up. Unfortunately, for some people, change is impossible...

The Michelin Way

Q.: *Did you go to talk with Toyota in Japan? Or did you speak with Valéo? You said that you do not want to have a link between the process and salary, but the empowerment process necessarily changes qualifications and training systems.*

B. B.: We talked with Toyota, and we had discussions with Valéo. At Michelin, a worker works for us for forty or forty-five years during which he has sufficient time to move up at least three classification levels. By virtue of the scientific organisation of labour, jobs are broken up. As a result, mechanically, there is less space given to career progression. The system we are trying to put in place makes it possible to mix management with a job

and also with regards to skill. In each team, people have a coefficient linked to their job, but the skills acquired separate from of the job in the name of a specific technical expertise (such as maintenance, adjustment, quality, or industrial organisation) give the right to points which make it possible to exceed the coefficients, and even to break through the glass ceiling of the three classification levels. The global empowerment approach also affects the global structure of wages with the possibility of variable salaries, individual salaries, group salaries, profit-share, and so on. We are in the design phase which also includes field surveys.

Limits to empowerment

Q.: *By empowering more and more people and allowing them to take more and more decisions, do you not find that there are more requests in terms of career, development and mobility?*

B. B.: Empowerment also includes empowerment of individuals in their own careers which is really the key. We are well aware that this model is the opposite of the traditional Michelin model. It is still one of our greatest sources of pride to belong to a company whose personnel department manages the careers of all its employees, and this is one of the reasons why people want to work for us. Michelin has this reputation of 'looking after' its employees' careers.

Q.: *The personnel department has the characteristic of not being made up of human resources specialists, far from it.*

B. B.: This is true. The members of the Michelin personnel department, who are career managers, come from all the branches of the company. Our employees should also start thinking about their careers on their own initiative. It is up to us to have good principles rather than countless rules.

Q.: *People talk a lot about the 'liberated company' which for the first time was the subject of a thesis at Paris-Dauphine University, and which is the basis of a divisive and unfortunately simplistic debate in France. Has Isaac Getz, who invented this philosophy, been to talk at Michelin? What is your position?*

B. B.: Personally, I do want to get myself involved in these quarrels whose reasons I understand. Isaac Getz's book, which I read a long time after we launched the empowerment project, sometimes enlightened me or alerted me to the notion of one's environment. In terms of the responsibilities I have been given, I do not think that I am leading Michelin down the path of the 'liberated company', however, I do not distance myself from it either. Nor do I reject lean management. I do not want to create an opposition which I find artificial. At Michelin, we try to find solutions in our teams which correspond to our history and who we are.

An erudite ignoramus

Q.: *Has your military experience helped to guide your actions at Michelin?*

B. B.: There are two sides to the army: the barracks and the military operations. The former is often a hierarchical pyramid, and the latter is essentially decentralised. I was asked to be in charge of the 2nd Regiment of Hussars. It had already been decided that this regiment was going to be disbanded very shortly afterward unless this tank unit could be transformed into an operational intelligence unit. I had a certain amount of money at my disposal, and a large area in which to work. I had no experience of operational intelligence. Consequently, I discovered the virtue of command in spite of my ignorance. Those in charge who are sufficiently ignorant, but who would like to drive their troops forward (continuing the military metaphor) and trust those who are knowledgeable, are a pre-requisite for empowerment.

■ Presentation of the speaker ■

Bertrand Ballarin: graduate of St Cyr military academy, Institut d'Etudes Politiques Paris (public service department), École de guerre, and former auditor of the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale. He began his career in the army (1974-2003). He started working for Michelin at the end of 2003 and managed the sites at Bourges and then Shanghai. When he returned to France in the spring of 2012, he became director of empowerment for the Group, and was in charge of personnel policy with regards to workers. He has been in charge of the Group's labour relations since July 2013.

Translation by Rachel Marlin (rjmarlin@gmail.com)
