



Seeing things differently in a very different world

Francois Coumau's career has taken him from marketing confectionery, launching health and beauty brands in Russia and creating ecommerce divisions from scratch, through to steering traditional mortar and bricks businesses to online marketplaces. He shares his views on the different environments within which leaders are now operating and explains how MDV's developmental assessment is helping to see things differently. Kate Pilgrim of MDV Consulting listens in.

In his portfolio life as an executive coach, consultant and non-executive director to many start-up, fast growth and mature businesses, Francois Coumau is better placed than most to have experienced first-hand the complexity and disruption from today's business environment and the digital revolution.

Starting his marketing career more traditionally as a graduate trainee with Mars which saw him leave his native France for the UK, Francois worked his way up the organisation ultimately undertaking stints as Marketing Director of both confectionery and Mars' Human Food Division.

His opportunity to move into the digital arena came in 2006 when he joined eBay, staying there for nine years running purely digital businesses as General Manager for continental Europe.

Francois's last three years of full-time executive life was at a UK media company called Immediate Media. During that time Francois created the company's ecommerce division from scratch, launched a new brand and helped see the company through a corporate sale.

Kate: "Do you feel the business environment today has changed and if so, what sort of issues are being experienced by the leaders you work with?"

Francois: *"In my non-executive director roles at more mature businesses, leaders are experiencing multiple challenges from increasing complexity.*

Firstly, they have to deal with digital and data-led transformation. In most cases, this involves significantly changing their business model and updating rapidly the competencies of their teams. The amount of data now available can be a competitive advantage if handled

effectively, but it also means a much more complex set of inputs for leaders to absorb, digest and turn into actionable plans. Secondly, leaders need to handle more and more demanding stakeholders, whether they are investors who want to more directly influence the business or regulators who have become more heavy-handed following the 2008 financial crisis.



The complexity experienced by start-ups and fast growth businesses is different. They are grappling with changing business models – as start-ups their business models have been successful but in a narrow way. Once investors are on board, funds available mean that there are more growth options at their disposal, which require them to think through carefully how they want to develop the business, which priorities to focus on and in which sequence.

There is also increased complexity from a team management point of view. The initial informal tribe needs to give way to a more structured approach to the organisation and young leaders do not always have the necessary experience to make that transition easily."

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Kate: "So, there's much going on there in terms of complexity and with the need to change decision-making depending upon the changing business situation, but does this actually have an impact on the individual leaders that you work with?"

Francois: "The main thing I've witnessed has been the decrease in control by leaders over their business and teams. Some of that loss of control is a natural implication of the scaling of the business, for example, when the start-up raises investment and the CEO starts reporting more formally to a board on which investors sit. But the loss of influence that is hardest for CEOs to acknowledge is the influence they have over their own teams. As their business scales, a top down management style does not work anymore, so they have to empower their teams and truly delegate a lot of the tasks they used to do themselves before. That sounds trivial but I have observed that this is something that start-up leaders find extremely hard to do, there is some sort of emotional block that prevents them from fully delegating. It could be that they don't feel their teams to be truly accountable or skilled enough, in any case it is an area I am trying to help them with my coaching".



Kate: "In your time in corporate life, were there any leadership assessments that you felt were particularly helpful to your ongoing development and if so, can you tell us about them?"

Francois: "I have been very lucky to work for companies (ie Mars, eBay and Immediate Media), which all placed great importance on leadership and investment in their people.

There were two assessments in particular that have stuck with me over the years. The first was during my time at eBay, where they used a range of tests and interviews to build a programme which greatly helped me in better navigating the complex matrix organisation that eBay was globally. I learnt a lot about stakeholder management, building internal partnerships and influencing in a complex, multi-functional and multi-country environment.

The second occurred whilst at Immediate Media. I did an Emotional Intelligence based assessment and it was a bit of an eye opener for me as it highlighted to me how factors like stress can have such an influence on a leader's different levels of emotional intelligence, for example on one's empathy."

Kate: "What interested you in the idea of the MDV developmental assessment and why was it relevant for you at this time?"

Francois: "I have recently completed a coaching qualification and a mutual contact suggested I meet Mike Vessey as he was doing interesting leadership work incorporating adult development. I was interested to take part in the developmental assessment to get a better idea of how it worked."

Kate: "Having been introduced to the concept of adult development (or vertical development) by MDV, what were your thoughts on this?"

Francois: "Having initially learnt about the vertical development approach from Mike, I was intrigued to look into it further but still feel I have only scratched the surface and am by no means an expert. My sense is that it is a complex, deep and profound approach. There seem to be multiple contributors to the overall theory which makes it more difficult to understand fully but this is also why it is so rich, multi-faceted and ultimately gratifying to master. I have started to put into practice some of the theory in my coaching work and I find that it lends itself very well to Founders/CEOs of start-ups as they are often required to adjust their world view as their business grows, in effect going through the stages of adult development."

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Kate: **"Having taken part in many leadership assessment and development activities over the years, I'm interested to hear what you felt about the MDV developmental assessment, how you would describe it and what sort of insights you gained from the experience?"**

Francois: *"I really enjoyed the process. The sequence of completing the questionnaires first, then the interview and finally the debrief a couple of weeks afterwards worked well for me.*

Melanie Long, who did run the process, was very skilled in creating a safe space for the interview, which allowed me to open up and access some level of awareness that I rarely reach. I found the report very comprehensive and rich, but it is only after the debrief with Melanie that I managed to internalise the various learnings and implications.

The assessment really helped me in becoming more aware of the stage of development I am likely to be at, as well as dealing with polarities and tensions in a productive way.

It definitely felt different to other assessments, it is not just looking at skills or performance but, more deeply, at how you are making sense of your environment."

Kate: **"Having experienced it yourself, do you think this type of assessment would benefit other leaders and organisations and where do you see the most benefit being gained?"**

Francois: *"Yes. My sense is that this type of assessment would be particularly helpful when a leader is confronted with a new challenge, be it a new role, a radical change in the work environment or new different challenges being thrown at her or him. I think the assessment would effectively surface the required change of mindset for the leader to effectively adapt to the new situation. This is not an assessment to highlight quick fixes or incremental changes, I believe. It is for leaders able and willing to embrace a new fundamental way on how they view things. Leaders who are happy to go on a journey but for the longer benefit from the reflection involved rather than an immediate short-term impact."*

Kate: **"So, looking back on your experience, what would you say have been some of your own takeaways or learnings from the process? Is there anything you can highlight which you've tried to do differently following your assessment feedback?"**

Francois: *"The assessment is progressive, in the sense that it takes time to unleash its full effect. Thanks to the assessment, I have become much more fully aware of a particular dilemma about various life choices, and that awareness has allowed me to tackle it in a very productive way, spurring me into some concrete actions and resolving the initial tension. I am now also aware of where I sit in the adult development stage, which in itself is a great tool for self-reflection and helping me focus my self-development in certain specific areas.*

The assessment has helped me go beyond the obvious, I would describe it as transformative and I expect its learnings to be with me for a sustained amount of time."

With sincere thanks to Francois for his time and thoughtful reflections.

For more information please contact:

Mike Vessey mike.vessey@mdvconsulting.co

Melanie Long melanie.long@mdvconsulting.co

MDV

Leadership and talent consultants

www.mdvconsulting.co

