



Leaving a Lasting Leadership Legacy

Adaptation, reflection and stewardship are forward-looking life lessons.

Jean-Claude Biver, a man who has faced many challenges, encountered his biggest personal hurdle in the midst of one of his biggest successes. He fell ill while working on the TAG Heuer Connected watch – a **transformative partnership** between Swiss luxury and Silicon Valley. After 45 years at the top of watchmaking, rather than discarding the mantle of leadership, he has embraced a new form of it, understanding that we are not limited by age.

Although Biver has stepped away from the day-to-day business, he insists on giving back. Not only by supporting his corporate successors and his mentees, but also by sharing his enthusiasm for lifelong learning with younger people. He recently sat down with me to discuss his life change and adaptation, reflection and stewardship.

Adaptation

As a veteran of both large and small luxury brands, Biver spent the past few years before his retirement reaching out to Silicon Valley. Naturally, he had to adapt and learn. Of his experiences, he said, “You are only old when you stop learning.” Working on the luxury smart watch gave Biver a sense that he was connected to the future, which he jokingly said rejuvenated him better than any facelift could have done.

“The name of the game is adaptation. You adapt by having doubts,” he said. The underlying learning that goes into adaptation is an openness and an understanding that others may know best. “When you start to listen to others, you are in the learning process. Then you will get the adaptation you need.”

Biver has a flexible mindset that allows for continuous questioning, which in turn leads to adaptation. He went towards new technology instead of hiding from it. Some say he **saved the Swiss watch industry** by remaining true to the craft of mechanical watches and upholding his belief in traditional methods. But this doesn’t mean that he rejected progress; he realised that “Silicon Valley has one dream – to enter luxury. Only one has succeeded – Apple – it is a reference for luxury.” And he has used that dream to help his own industry.

The capacity for adaptation can come from quarters other than business. A few years ago, Biver created an informal **advisory board** of young people who shared their views with him to help foresee trends on the horizon. He recognised the importance of listening to their voices and adapting messages about the brand accordingly.

Many would resent a major illness, but Biver looks at his as a teacher that helped him to adapt. It forced

him to wind down slowly instead of suddenly stopping: “If I look back to my short life,” he explained, “I would say one of the best things that has happened to me was that I was ill! Because if I hadn’t been ill, I would have gone on like a lunatic. I would have forgotten to give back and my life would have been only important to me. My life...should be important in what I give back to others.”

Reflection

That reciprocity has become a top priority for Biver now that he is no longer in the office every day. He spoke about different periods in his life: of learning his business, doing it and now giving back with his time and hope. The more you do, he explained, the more you have to give back.

His advice about reflection for today’s business leaders is clear: Disconnect from the regular grind. When you focus on this meeting, this agenda, this result, it’s hard to see the bigger picture: “We have to learn generosity, we have to learn that we belong to a community and that we have a role in this community. It’s to connect with others.” For Biver, reflection breeds connection.

A leader’s purpose is “to help and this is how culture, literature, knowledge has developed. Knowledge has developed because we have given back,” he said. Imagine a scenario in which people hoard knowledge – there is no growth. My own past **research** reflects this and shows how transparency boosts innovation. In fact, using secrecy to protect strategic knowledge hinders innovation benefits. Value creation, on all levels, requires us to participate freely in open exchanges that may spark new ideas in others.

Stewardship

As a business leader, Biver has storied experience in stewardship and mentoring. His leadership has **inspired** people like Jean-Frédéric Dufour, now CEO of Rolex. Biver now has more time to focus on giving back. Leaders who want a **productive legacy** hope that their stewardship grew their companies and helped their workers flourish.

Even before he left the CEO’s office, Biver reflected on the importance of education and how it might need to change. STEM subjects are necessary for business but so are artistic ones. Outside of the arts, Biver’s **advice** to INSEAD MBA students who were about to rejoin the workforce was this: Be passionate about your work, hire great people and focus on ethics.

For Biver, education maximises our humanity. He embraces AI in learning but emphasises that it will never have our human characteristics of intuition,

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instinct, love or a soul – aspects of ourselves that we must cultivate. Educators can encourage students to develop these rather than learning by rote or gaining skills that can be done quicker and better by a machine. “AI should not be a threat, it should be a help,” he explained.

He expressed concern for students who are captivated by technology to such an extent that they find themselves limited. Those who can use it wisely while holding onto their uniquely human traits will do better than those who only consume technology, Biver said.

Further to this idea of cultivating certain traits, Biver wished that even in business schools, we teach art to develop our humanity. One outcome of developing intuition and instinct is pragmatic thinking – reflecting on what works best. A computer isn’t designed to do this, but people are.

More lessons to come

Working closely with Biver on case studies and recently at our Alumni Forum, I look forward to more insights from him as he approaches his first anniversary of “retirement”. He told me that this past year, he attended 60 conferences, so he hardly seems to have slowed down. Adaptation, reflection and stewardship have powered his personal business as a force for good. Biver, as always, leads by example and continues to rejuvenate those around him.

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