Interview with Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, Nestlé’s Chairman: Insights of a Global Leader

Conducted By Katrina Burrus Barbey

For those of you in the know, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe is a force to be reckoned with. As Chair of Nestlé, the biggest Food and Beverage company in the world with over 285,000 employees, his recent shift from CEO to Chair also came with a shift in focus from more operational issues concerned with profit, margins, and strategy to a visionary perspective concerned with managing resources over the next decades.

As executive coaches, our primary goal is to support and spar with all executives, from CEO to Chairman, on issues connected with the necessary shifts that occur in any transition. I observed first-hand the shifts taking place in the mindset of Peter Brabeck-Letmathe while editing his speeches over the years to his top 200 executives. I first interviewed him for Thunderbird, School of Global Management in 1999 when he stepped into his new role as CEO. Recently, I asked him if I might have a follow up interview a decade later, when I knew it would be time for me to write my second book. As I prepared my manuscript on Global Nomadic Leaders™ a whole year after he left his role as CEO to chair the Board of Directors, he graciously accepted. Although Peter Brabeck-Letmathe has always been a man of vision, this unhampere interview more readily portrays the long term issues that now concern him as Chair.

After being led through the tall glass building, designed to symbolize transparency, that is Nestlé’s headquarters, I stepped into an office flooded with sunshine. A wall of windows presented an unobstructed and breathtaking view of Lake Léman. I was met by a tall, handsome man with crystal blue eyes. We sat down in the seating area of his office. His poise contrasted with my fumbling to get pen, paper, and computer ready. My questions were answered in fluent English tainted with Austrian and Spanish accents, a giveaway of his multicultural influences. I was as excited to get started with his interview as you will surely be to read it. Let me delay no longer.

Katrina Burrus: What elements do you like in your role as a CEO? And as a Chairman?
Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: I enjoy the responsibility of leading a company. Nestlé has existed for more than 140 years and is the culmination of the work of many leaders and of thousands of workers. Each leader takes the company from where it is currently, adapts and prepares it for the future.

The Chairman and the CEO have full responsibility for the long-term development of Nestlé. They have to take the company into the future and create a solid foundation for the next 140 years. It is the CEO who makes things happen. You take something, adapt it to the actual situation, and prepare it for the future.

You have to make sure that the company continues to grow, which in a rapidly changing environment is quite a challenge. This growth must be profitable, since without growth and profit, there is no future. You need to prepare people and make sure they know which direction the company is taking. Quite a lot of strategies need to be put into place to do this.

A chairman has a fiduciary responsibility to the shareholders. The chairman and the company’s board members are in charge of supervising the CEO, the management team and Nestlé’s long-term strategy to assure the long term development of the company.

A chairman can only achieve this by maintaining a close relationship with the company’s shareholders and by assuring its ecological, social, and economical sustainability. At Nestlé, we have been working on a new concept of Creating Shared Value linking and optimizing the interest of society and shareholders.

No company will survive forever if it does not constantly reinvent itself. For example, when I was CEO, we shifted our focus from supplying basic food and beverages to nutrition, health, and wellness. Now, as Chairman, it is my job to think together with the CEO about the next step, the future for Nestlé in 10-15 years.

By thinking of the long term sustainability of our company, we identified water as the most important resource. Without water, neither society nor Nestlé would be sustainable. We need water for the production of raw materials, for the production processes, and for our consumers, both globally and locally.

A coalition of interests is needed to succeed. This is the reason why we participated in the creation of the Global Water Resource Group. Water as a global resource will be scarce by 2030. We are working with McKinsey to study how to use water in a more sustainable way. For this, I am involved with many associations such as the World Economic Forum, Millennium Goals, and Global Water Initiative.
Therefore, today as Chairman, I am increasingly concerned with society’s global issues. Besides water, another big challenge is energy, especially the link between energy – water – food. [This is] an essential issue to be solved during the next decades. My position on the Board of EXXON the world’s leading energy company helps my better understanding of this challenge. Additionally, we also have an interest in keeping Europe competitive. My concern as Chairman is to maintain Nestlé’s long-term sustainability and …concentrating on two to three big resource issues and the vital aspect of corporate governance.

Katrina Burrus: You explained the key responsibilities as Chairman. What was the biggest influence on you growing up that prepared you as a leader and Chair?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: It was attending university in the sixties. I learned how media can distort reality. From that point on, I took a critical stance towards media. I have never accepted an opinion first hand. It is important for me to form my own opinion. Before 1968, the communist ideology was very strong in Europe and certain media painted a picture that did not depict reality as I had seen it personally in the countries behind the iron curtain. I saw how the press distorted events in Chile, and now it is doing the same with global warming. I do not easily believe something if I cannot investigate the topic myself. I think a man of competence always knows about what he is speaking and only speaks when he know about it. This gives you much more credibility as a leader. When you talk, you know what you are talking about instead of just repeating what somebody else says. When I talk about water, I have done my research work and can make assertive remarks based on extensive research. If I am doubtful of climate change, it is because, unlike most people, I have read the many reports, and I am not convinced of the data and models applied. Therefore, before taking a position, I have thoroughly investigated the issue. One needs to understand and form one’s own opinion. If I can arrive at my own opinion on a subject, then I can talk with more authenticity and authority.

For example, some years ago at the Economic Forum in Davos, corporate social responsibility was very much debated. Everyone was saying we needed to give back to society. It became a slogan. In Davos’ final plenary, when I heard we had to give back to society yet again, I told them Nestlé does not need to give back to society, because Nestlé has not been stealing from society. But the subject intrigued me, and we started to work on “Corporate Social Responsibility” and three years later created a new concept called Creating Shared Value.1 This is based on Michael Porter’s article on “CSR” and “competitivity,” which we developed further.

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1Creating Shared Value is a fundamental part of the way Nestlé does business. In order to create long-term value for our shareholders, we must at the same time create value for society at large.
Katrina Burrus: How did and how do your recreational activities influence you?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: Alpinism and my experience in mountain climbing also influenced me a great deal as a leader. I still mountain climb (alpinism) and conduct a company. Yes, both at the same time. When mountain climbing, I learned that it is not only important to reach the summit, but it is also essential to come back from the summit and reach the valley in a healthy condition. Too many mountain climbers die on their way back down. You should never give 100% of your energy to get to the summit. You need at least 20% of your energy reserved to come back down from the mountain. It’s the same thing in business. If you give everything you have to the business, you are pushing yourself towards incapacity and you have nothing left to give. This is why in mountain climbing and business, you need to manage your energy. I climbed the Cervin the first time up to 4200 meters and the Aconcagua up to 6400. The weather was so bad on both occasions, I thought we might get up to the mountain top but not return safely. I had to calculate the risk and make the difficult decision to return before reaching the summit. I never took Nestlé to this kind of edge. We always had enough resources to continue to grow even during the biggest crisis—unlike the bankers who played everything and lost billions. When I was young, I also wanted to be a music director, but I found out early on that I was not a talented enough musician. So I did not pursue an unrealistic dream but started to study economics. So instead of conducting an orchestra, I learned to conduct a company.

When I go to the desert on vacation, I go back to the essentials. I become more grounded. When I am on a motorbike ride, I spend my time with normal and ordinary people. I co-exist with mechanics and sleep with shepherds. With my motorbike, I travel to primitive areas. It is important because it brings me back to reality and to the simple things in life. As managers, we are a privileged minority, and the majority of the people live quite differently. It is good to have a regular reality check.

Katrina Burrus: What influence did your parents have on you?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: My parents were my stable anchors, which allowed me to be highly mobile. My father, after WWII, was a petrol truck driver. From the age of three, I rode the truck with him. Additionally, we travelled nearly every weekend. They provided me with emotional stability and a sense of mobility.

Katrina Burrus: What values did your parents give you?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: Enormous respect for others. My parents were extremely tolerant, open, family oriented. Very strong family values. Friendship.
We came from a strong religious background. Catholic. This was an old system where you had to go to church on Sundays. If you did not, you had to report on Mondays at school why you did not go to church. It was quite stifling. At 20, I left the church. My father told me I would be closer to God being on mountain tops.

Mother dedicated her time to the family. She had to work after the war. My town in Austria was the second-most bombed city in Austria. It was a tough time. Family and friends were their values.

Katrina Burrus: What was important to you between the ages of 23 and 33?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: I started as an ice cream salesman. I had my truck and my customers. I was successful as a salesman. A salesman is only successful if his customers are happy. One needs to create natural confidence. Customers would have so much confidence in me that they would tell me to fill up the freezer with what I believed they needed. They knew that I would not cheat them, and I knew what they would be selling best. That is the driving force of any business. If you cannot satisfy your customers, as a company you have no reason to exist. Even as a young salesman, I started working very early and finished my work late. But what I enjoyed was the freedom I had to take moments to enjoy life. For example, if the weather was good, I could stop at a lake and take a swim. I was evaluated by my results and not by how I spent my time. This same freedom I enjoyed as CEO. If you are judged by your results and your performance, you can enjoy a relatively high level of freedom.

Katrina Burrus: How did you progress so rapidly within the company’s hierarchy?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: I never asked for a promotion and as a leader, I reject people’s requests for career planning. In the 1970’s, my professional target was to become a Marketing Manager of one of our subsidiaries. I thought this is where my skills and competencies would be best used and where I could evolve as a leader. I wanted to be the best Marketing and Sales Manager. Up this level, it is professionalism that is important. The next step leading to general management is one where professionalism alone is not good enough; you need to take into account other social aspects. You need to start compromising. Political astuteness comes into play. At first, learning how to compromise was not so attractive to me. Then I learned how to compromise without giving up the essentials. I leveraged this competence when I was CEO in Ecuador. Political astuteness, compromising, and negotiating were also essential skills as General Manager in Venezuela, which was a much bigger and even more complex market. There, I had to negotiate the end of a long nationalization process.

If you look in Europe at a world map, you will always find Europe in the center. The first time you look at a Japanese map you see the world completely different, you nearly do not recognize the world—so different the map looks.
**Katrina Burrus:** What did your experience of living abroad bring you?

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** One would not be able to manage a global company such as Nestlé without having experienced different cultures, societies, and countries. How could you satisfy 1.3 billion Muslims if you do not understand the Koran or what *halal* food is? Many Europeans still think Europe is the center of society and civilization. If I am allowed to generalize, the Americans think that there is only the American way, and the rest of the world should follow their model. The US thinks their model is the only one that works. Once you have experience from outside Europe or the US, you have a different point of view. You have less of an ethnocentric perspective.

Having lived in and experienced different types of civilizations helps you understand the impact of history and social trends on the way business is done. For example, there is a protestant way of doing business in many regions of the US and a catholic way in South America. It also makes you better understand why most of Africa is the way it is; their society is largely based on a strong history of tribalism. We need to know how to make the right decision in each cultural context.

We are too much accustomed to see things from our own perspective. If you look in Europe at a world map, you will always find Europe in the center. The first time you look at a Japanese map you see the world completely different, you nearly do not recognize the world—so different the map looks. Each country I visit, I look at the respective world map. Each country places its country in the center of the world, which opens very distinguished perspectives.

**Katrina Burrus:** Traveling is not a guarantee of success in itself but your global mindset is. So Ecuador, Venezuela, and then it was Vevey.

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** Dr Helmut Maucher, the previous CEO, asked me to come to work in Vevey. My first reaction was rather negative, and I enjoyed the operational responsibility of a market. But Dr Maucher told me he was not asking my opinion; it was a request. So I moved to the headquarters, where a completely different job waited for me. Strategy became the challenge and soon I enjoyed it, as much as I did operations before.

**Katrina Burrus:** Why did they choose you as Nestlé’s CEO? What was your mandate?

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** I did not have a mandate. I was already strategically responsible for different sectors of our business and had the overall responsibility for marketing and
communications. As CEO, I identified new areas of business such as pet-care and extended other sectors such as the ice-cream business. I gave the company a simple, but challenging, objective: the “Nestlé Model,” consisting of 5-6% of organic growth combined with a constant improvement of our EBIT margin. Over the last 13 years, Nestlé has performed to that target. To achieve this, I put simple tools in place such as 60/40+. Each single product has to be continuously checked on a clear consumer preference (60/40) and should have a nutritional advantage. That is the way we drive innovation in a decentralized manner. Additionally, I introduced a concept for our innovation and renovation efforts, which I called *time pacing*: a minimum of 20% of our products had to be “renovated” every year. To accelerate our business further, I gave the organization four operational pillars to execute, which are still valid today. But I was conscious that they alone would not be enough to assure the “Nestlé Model” over a 10-20 years period.

So four to five years later, I approached the Board and told them that if we remained just a Food and Beverage company, we could not sustain our growth targets. We discussed this with the Board and we decided to gradually become a Nutrition, Health, and Wellness company, which opens opportunities for higher growth and margins. My successor has the tools and the broad vision that he participated in building, and he has the conviction that for the next ten years, he will be able to achieve our Nestlé targets. The focus is now on good execution.

Katrina Burrus: What career planning does Nestlé have for its future top leaders?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: I am not in favor of career planning. If you enjoy what you do and do it 5% better than others, Nestlé will always need you and you will climb up the career ladder. The biggest stumbling block for growth is finding sufficiently competent people to help us grow. So if you do a good job at Nestlé, Nestlé will take care of your career.

Katrina Burrus: But then you must have systems in place to enable you to detect talents?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: We have systems in place to look for young talents that have the ability to become members of top management. I had followed the career of my replacement for a long time before he became one of the official candidates for the CEO job. There was a time when Mr. Bulcke did not have experience of a large market, so we moved him to Germany to gain that experience. Then we placed him as responsible for the most important geographical region: the Americas. We move people through the organization to broaden their expertise. Then it also depends on how they perform, faced with these new challenges.
Someone came up to me and asked me what our career plans were for him. I told him if he brought in results according to our management principles, we would take care of his career. If he underperformed, any career plan would be useless. Telling me what drives a leader in his or her life is a more important question to answer.

**Katrina Burrus:** Have you been disappointed with the leaders you have groomed?

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** Yes, of course it can also happen. I brought people in from outside Nestlé. Then it turned out that they changed their priorities to focus on their private life rather than their professional life, and/or their performance did not meet our expectations. Other leaders that are 45 years old get desperate that they are not General Managers yet, and they leave Nestlé. I did not always recognize these personality traits.

Money is not a driver to stay within Nestlé. If it is, then some leaders leave for more money. All members of the Executive Board have had better financial offers. What we offer is a sense that we are part of a big successful family. We identify with the Nestlé’s culture. We retain people, thanks to our values.

We have had our leaders kidnapped and, unfortunately, also sometimes killed in Nestlé’s turbulent and remote outposts. Nestlé will do everything and beyond what is legally required to take care of its people and families. A Nestlé employee is like a family member. This is why sometimes the media says Nestlé is like a sect and secretive. We have our own leadership management principles that are very strongly embedded in our company culture. People identify with and live for Nestlé’s principles. That is what keeps this company together.

When we employ someone the first thing we do is to give them the Nestlé management and leadership principles to read. Afterwards, we ask the potential recruit how they interpret and feel about these principles. Only if we feel that the people can combine their own values with those of the company will we be interested in pursuing the discussion of hiring them.

**Katrina Burrus:** What about Paul Polman? He was hired at the top level of management and left Nestlé for your competitor?

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** Paul Polman is a very bright manager. I had followed his career over the years. What attracted me most to Paul was his commitment to the blind people of Africa and the values it portrayed. He took blind people to the Kilimanjaro.

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2Nestlé’s values include Integrity, Mutual respect, Tolerance of other people’s ideas, Pragmatism, Open-mindedness, Straight and frank communication, Knowing how to take risks, and Practicing what we preach.
He took a blind man up the Mont Blanc. He created a charitable foundation for blind people in Africa. This is why when he made the decision to retire at Procter and Gamble, I contacted him. He was competent and bright, but it was his humanitarian action that appealed to me.

When Nestlé was looking for my successor, it was in a very privileged situation. We had five valid candidates to succeed me. There are not many companies that have that many suitable candidates to take over a CEO position. After examining Nestlé’s needs and current situation, the Board finally chose Paul Bulcke. He is the man for the current situation.

Whenever you bring somebody from outside Nestlé, you have to make sure that the leader’s values do not clash with Nestlé’s. This does not mean that you should not bring in different opinions. Openness and tolerance invite different opinions and encourage leaders to do things differently. Paul Polman brought many new ideas to Nestlé, and he too is using many ideas that he saw at Nestlé. Values such as openness and tolerance invite different opinions. If both sides are sufficiently open-minded, this is a great and positive exchange.

**Katrina Burrus:** Does it not bother you that a person at that level of seniority leaves to the competitor?

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** Absolutely not. I have never been secretive as to what we are doing. One can simply go to road shows and find out what our competitors’ strategies are. No single business model is valid for every company. I am still in contact with Paul Polman. I thought that becoming the CEO of Unilever was the best thing for him and for Unilever; it is part of the value of tolerance.

At Nestlé, we have been discussing Creating Shared Value for quite some time now. Now I read that various competitors are integrating this concept into their strategies. How each one applies this approach will be different from one company to another. We all benefit from this.

Paul Polman knows about Nestlé and the way Nestlé will react. I know as much about him and Unilever. I know what he is going to do and what he is not going to do. There is nothing wrong about this. I know what his motivations are and he knows mine.

**Katrina Burrus:** What is one of Nestlé’s current and biggest immediate challenge?

**Peter Brabeck-Letmathe:** To manage complexity with operational efficiency.
Nestlé’s business portfolio is very complex and yet it requires operational efficiency. Complexity usually means inefficiency and to manage Nestlé’s complexity efficiently was really a big challenge.

If you want to grow and be as large as Nestlé, you cannot be just a basic food and beverage company. We diversified into pet care products, Nespresso, water, and many other new activities. Each new business increases Nestlé’s complexity. Each new business needs to be handled differently. You cannot sell powdered milk the same way you sell ice cream. So Nestlé leaders need to manage each sector differently. What we had to prove to the financial community is that we can manage different business models very efficiently.

Katrina Burrus: What did Nestlé need to change for this to happen?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: Decisions affecting the consumer and the marketplace have to be decentralized. Each specific activity needs its own captain, who should make the best possible decision for his boat, while maintaining the group’s overall objectives. To be able to do so, they need a strategic and a value framework. This structure then allows the combination of complexity and operational efficiency. Basically, we need three things to achieve the objectives of complexity combined with efficiency:

1. We launched GLOBE (Global Business Excellence).
2. We further decentralized decision making in all aspects that the consumer can perceive (taste, advertising, packaging, etc.), while centralizing all activities that the consumer could not see (logistics, finance, etc.).
3. We strengthened our corporate culture. You cannot decentralize if people do not know within which value framework decisions should be made. It sounds very simple, but it is rather difficult to implement.

Before, we operated as a huge supertanker with one captain. We broke it up into a fleet of many different, agile vessels. There is one admiral who manages the whole fleet. But there is one captain on each boat. They all work for one global mission and are interconnected through GLOBE. To keep the operation efficient, there are common supplier boats for all attack vessels who are fighting for the leading position in the marketplace.

Katrina Burrus: What are Nestlé’s next steps? What type of leadership is needed?

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe: We need to consolidate our Nutrition, Health, and Wellness position while continuing to deliver the Nestlé model at least for the next ten years. Today, what is necessary is
flawless execution and aligning people behind strategies of the different businesses. This is what we need from our operational management. Where are we going from here to the next 10-20 years? Besides managing complexity and keeping the troops aligned, we are involved in a long-term transformation process. The Board, the Chairman, and the CEO are working on the latter as we speak.

Katrina Burrus: We will be watching with interest Nestlé’s evolution.

CONCLUSION

As CEO, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe brought Nestlé to new heights of profitability and growth. This in depth and frank interview has revealed him to be a man of vision, dedication and great insight. He is a man who takes things seriously and researches everything thoroughly. His view on climate change, promotion, and the importance of water to sustain Nestlé’s long-term growth illustrates that he is a bold leader. His achievements at Nestlé are exemplary, and all this from a man who began as a door-to-door ice cream salesman. As CEO, he restructured Nestlé to adapt and prepare it for the future. As Chairman, Brabeck-Letmathe is innovatively linking society and shareholders. As Board member, his responsibilities are to supervise the CEO, the management team, and Nestlé’s long term strategy and sustainability. His knowledge and wisdom lead him to allocate resources according to what he believes will be society’s global issues. In addition, he actively contributes to maintaining Nestlé competitive edge and Europe’s competitive environment. Meanwhile, he ensures that Nestlé is creating shared value while maintaining the company ecologically, socially, and economically. I have no doubt that Peter Brabeck-Letmathe is a man of his word.

RESOURCE

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Peter Brabeck-Letmathe is also a Member of the following Boards:
Vice Chairman, L’Oréal (France)
Vice Chairman, Credit Suisse Group (Switzerland)
Member of the Board of Directors, Exxon Mobil Corporation (USA)
Member of the Board of Directors, Delta Topco Limited (Formula 1) (Jersey)
Member of the Foundation Board and Chairman of the International Business Council of the World Economic Forum leading the "Water Resources" project
Member of the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT), part of the Steering Committee and chairman of the Foreign Economic Relations workgroup

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR/INTERVIEWEE

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe

Website: www.nestle.com

Peter Brabeck-Letmathe led the Nestlé Group from 1997 to 2008, first as CEO until 2005, and then as Chairman and CEO. In April 2008, he handed over the office of CEO and is now Chairman of Nestlé S.A. He graduated from the University of World Trade in Vienna with a degree in Economics. After joining the Nestlé Group in 1968, he spent a significant part of his career in Latin America. In 1987 he was transferred to Nestlé's international headquarters in Vevey as Senior Vice President in charge of the Culinary Products Division, and was appointed Executive Vice President in 1992. Mr. Brabeck-Letmathe has received several awards, including "La Orden Mexicana del Aguila Azteca," the Schumpeter Prize for outstanding contribution in Economics, and the Austrian Cross of Honour for service to the Republic of Austria.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Katrina Burrus, Ph.D., MCC

Phone: + 41 22 750 81 11
Email: drburrus@mkbconseil.ch
Website: www.mkbconseil.ch

Dr. Katrina Burrus has a track record coaching global leaders across many diverse sectors. She founded MKB Conseil & Coaching in 1994, providing coaching to global nomadic leaders, abrasive executives, and to top talents. She holds a Ph.D. in human and organizational systems from Fielding Graduate University, and was the first Master Certified Coach (MCC) in Switzerland through the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Founder and past board member of ICF Switzerland and on the editorial board of *IJCO: The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations™*, Dr. Burrus draws on experience in over 30 countries in her professional practice in multinational organizations such as Nestlé, Novartis, United Nations, and World Trade Organization. After numerous published chapters and presentations at various international forums, Katrina published her last book in French, *Les Dirigeants Nomades: Comment les Identifier, les Attirer et les Retenir*. She continues her research for her next book on “Gaining Crucial Competitive Advantage in Global Business: Developing Global Nomadic Leadership.”

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