



THE ASCENT: A TENZING PODCAST - PIERRE DUBUC

Title:

Pierre Dubuc talks wunderkinds, social impact and never giving up

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Episode Overview:

Guy talks to Pierre Dubuc about his incredible, 20-year journey building [OpenClassrooms](#) from a hobby teaching school friends to build websites, into a \$60m online education platform. After a few seismic shifts in their business model, and coming close to throwing in the towel, Pierre and his business partner, Mathieu, settled on a vision that felt authentic and impactful, and watched the business soar. Today, their five-year plan is to train, help graduate, and place in the workforce, one million students per year. It's a long way from Googling "how to write a business plan" while still at college...

Quick-fire Round:

- **Favourite book?** [The Fall by Albert Camus](#)
- **Most inspiring or inspirational person?** [John Chambers](#), former CEO of Cisco
- **Most important quality for a founder and entrepreneur?** Resilience

PIERRE DUBUC TRANSCRIPT

GUY:

So Pierre, you started OpenClassrooms in 2013, it's now a \$60m series-B funded company, you're aiming to get a million people educated and a million in work by 2025. Pretty impressive. But what's maybe even more amazing is that the genesis of the company began long before 2013 - when you were still at school. Take me back to where it all first started.

PIERRE:

We actually started a personal project back in 1999, which was actually the basis of this company. So in 1999, we're super young, we were in middle school, aged 11 and 13 - with my co-founder, [Mathieu Nebra](#) - and we started to create online courses. The very first course we created was on web development to help some friends to build their own websites. And we published this course online, and we kept going with the online learning community to create courses and publish them for free, in kind of a naturalistic way. And we did this for over ten years.

It became the reference platform to learn coding in French-speaking countries, so pretty much every developer, software engineer, learned through OpenClassrooms.

And we turned this big hobby of ours into a business - into a fast-growing company - into more entrepreneur journey in 2013 when we created OpenClassrooms, and now we're on this mission to make education accessible, especially professional education - education leading to jobs, leading to competencies. So, we train tomorrow's competencies and jobs, like tech and digital skills, for example.

GUY:

Wow, that's an amazing amount in a short space of time. When I was 11 I wasn't that productive...

PIERRE:

So, first of all, don't think we were running around running this big business at 13 or 15... It was the equivalent of running something like a YouTube channel or an Instagram account, today. It was a big hobby that became bigger and bigger. We spent time at home building the website, so I was actually the developer of the platform, coding the platform, and my friend Mathieu wrote the content - the courses themselves.

GUY:

Tell me about Mathieu. What are his super strengths?

PIERRE:

He's the best teacher. He has an all-round gift for teaching and pedagogy. He wrote the very first course and since then, all of the courses he designs are the most popular ones on OpenClassrooms.

He's just extremely great at writing and teaching, and he built the pedagogy, basically. And the tone, the content, the structure - all of this, he's intuitively really good at, and recognised widely. People say they like the other teachers' courses, but Mathieu's are always slightly better.

We're actually very different personalities. We're so complementary to one another. It's worked out really well for many years, because we don't overlap a lot, but we have

common values... but in terms of work and traits, we can do something really different.

GUY:

So he's like the artist and you're the commercial engine?

PIERRE:

The way we phrase it, we say, he can innovate and build new stuff, and I can take it and make it grow in scale.

BREAK

GUY:

I just want to jump back to something you said, you described it as a hobby - was there a goal?

PIERRE:

The latter, I'd say. It was more to help people and build something and have fun, and then we added layers and layers, and at some point, after a couple of years, we realised it was big already.

From there, the first question during our college studies, was, *what are we going to do at the end of our college studies on this?! We were spending a lot of time on this, we already had tens of thousands of euros to host the website, and we had ads on the website to pay the bills, but it was a struggle to make sure it was sustainable.*

We knew we couldn't go this way if we had a normal job, so we thought, *we have to create something.*

GUY:

It sounds like it was a very conscious decision - *let's go full in, to make this our career.* Was that a seminal moment?

PIERRE:

I remember when I was 17, (Mathieu is just a bit older - three years older), we started to talk about *should we stop the whole thing, should we create a non-profit, should we create a company?* And there was a conscious choice to build a company, throw everything in there, and at least have this legal framework. And we waited for me to turn 18 to create the company together.

From there it was fun.

We both remember when we built our first business plan - we were the generation raised on Google and we were like, *how do you create a business?* And you just Google it! We had no idea what a business plan is, and Google keeps feeding us. And we started to

build a business plan. The end goal was to build a company that generated revenue of around 100k euros a year. And we were like, *if we ever reach 100k I think this is the end of our lives!* We were teenagers, and we thought, *with that much money, you're done!*

GUY:

When I was 18 I was waiting to stop using fake ID. You waited to incorporate a business. Different paths! So, you had a lot of hosting costs, and you were working for free... the main cost was hosting, and you were getting that on old school banner ads. The goal was 100k, so you probably reached that quickly with that much traffic? And then you brought in an investor, quite early on?

PIERRE:

I think in the first year we made around 75,000 euros in revenue. It was a good start. We were still students! It was a lot of money. Obviously it wasn't profit, it was revenue, but we thought, *this is good*, so we kept going.

Towards the end of our studies we decided we should go full time and take it to the next level. At this stage we thought, *let's be much more intentional, we can build a startup company, we can raise money... we can build a business model around education and not ads.* At the same time, the ad market really changed, with Google and Facebook - revenue was decreasing. Banners kept getting bigger. We hated advertising, actually, as users - we thought, *this isn't us, we don't want ads on the website.* All of that combined led us to switch and raise the first round and build OpenClassrooms the way it is today.

GUY:

How did that work out for you?

PIERRE:

Less than a year later we came back to them and said, *"so we want to change brand, team, model, everything - are you fine with it?"* They were like, *"I guess, if you think it's smart, let's do it."*

GUY:

You go to the investor - *what we told you nine months ago, forget it.* How did you manage that? How were the dynamics around that?

PIERRE:

The investor supported us really well and trusted us - he was all in, basically. He challenged us on the plan, but then he said, *"if you guys want to do it and think it's the right move, then let's do it."* He supported us. Then we went through this transition, and it was really tough, and we had our doubts, but after one year we started to literally pull the plug on banner ads, every month... and you're trying to launch the new one, and you know the old one is going to fold but don't know if the other one will pick up, and it's

quite stressful. We managed to make the transition, to kill advertising, and to grow the new business line.

GUY:

Did everyone make the journey? That's quite a massive amount of change. How was that?

PIERRE:

It was really tough. We changed most of the team.

GUY:

That's a quick way to grow up. As a leader and as a manager, what were the biggest lessons?

PIERRE:

Our biggest struggle was with HR and people. We learned to be extremely explicit and intentional, and express, really precisely in writing, what you want to do, the way you want to do it, what you don't want to become, what you want to become etc.

This is also when we worked hard on the definition of our mission, our vision, the way we want to work, the type of business models we want to work on, the type of people we want to work with. Some people liked it and joined the band, but some wanted to do something else, and that's fine.

BREAK

GUY:

Let's talk about the vision and how you managed to hang on to your values as you went in a new direction. Can you give me some examples of culture you were explicit about?

PIERRE:

Years later we defined it in a really precise way. The mission is to *make education accessible*. The vision is to *make professional education accessible*. We defined four principles: *we care, we dare, we persist and we tell it as it is*.

There is self-behaviour behind this, it's both internal and external... For example, *we care* is about the behaviours you want to have on the team: respectful, trustworthy, the relationships across team members. But it's also externally - we care about our students, mentorship and coaching. We care about the business and the project as a whole, so it's about accountability, and responsibility. We paired them together. So we say, "*we care, but we tell it like it is*." You can be nice to each other, but at the end of the day, if you've got to say something, if there are frictions or conflicts, you need to address them.

And we pair *we dare* and *we persist*. At first, you're going to fail, but you need to keep

pushing to make sure it's going to work out. The persistence, the fact we didn't stop, we didn't just drop out - that was key to our success.

GUY:

A lot of the founders I meet start with instinctive thought processes and then struggle to be more precise as it becomes bigger. For you guys, it was a hobby, it was something you enjoyed, but this pivot to a specific mission-driven business - how much was instinct and research and precision involved when you set that new business plan up?

PIERRE:

It's a good question. We realised that we kept using traditional business frameworks, and we learned about business and management through very traditional frameworks, like books. We had no idea, we hadn't worked! It was kind of - if I exaggerate a bit - the posture of a manager you saw in a movie. At some point we thought, *this isn't us, this is fake, it isn't where we want to be* and we felt uncomfortable and needed to operate differently. This is when we started to truly create the company we wanted to create: a mission-driven company... because we thought the end goal for us was not to generate profit, but to have a social impact. And of course you need to generate profit to grow and be sustainable, but it's not the end goal. So we started to say that out loud, to write it down, to define the mission, to be much more intentional, also about how we wanted to operate and manage teams. That really helped a lot. So now we feel much better because this is truly the way we want to operate, and how we want to build the business, and it was not something that somebody else told us.

GUY:

In terms of vision and core beliefs, you've been together 20 years, worked closely together for 15. It's a really rare skill for co-founders to stay together for such a long time. What binds you together?

PIERRE:

We have routines, so we can keep the relationship healthy. For example, every six months, for many years, we spend a three-day weekend together, just the two of us. It's very structured, now, and we talk about us, our personal lives, about the business, strategy, if we feel good in our jobs, what we want to do in the next 6-12 months. We also talk about tactics, and are we doing well or not well... what are we doing that we should stop doing, what are we not doing that we should start doing... and we usually end up with an action plan to change a few things. And it's really a way for us to stay aligned, on a personal and business level. I think it was critical to building a long-standing healthy relationship.

BREAK

GUY:

You've had a 20-year journey, with so many highs, but can you tell me about some of the

worst moments?

PIERRE:

The switch to OpenClassrooms and the launch and transition was really tough - mostly transitioning the team, and convincing people it's the right thing, and we had to part ways with some of them - that was really difficult.

We also had times when we didn't have any cash, and we had to transfer our savings and our families' savings into the company bank account - that was really tough.

And more recently, less than a year ago, we had a tough moment when we missed a few targets, and kept growing and didn't have the revenue and yet we were increasing spending - that was a really uncomfortable moment... we had to take some serious actions. Bit painful, a lot of pressure. We turned it around, and in the end it worked out, but when you're in the middle of the sh*t storm, it's always really hard.

Sometimes it's longer, sometimes it's shorter, but now we've experienced this so many times, we know it's a cycle... You have highs and you have lows, and when you're in a low you need to keep going, because at some point it's going to get back to the high. You know - it's raining, and has been for days, but one day you'll see the sun. When you experience that so many times, even when it's really freaking hard, deep down you know it's just a phase.

GUY:

Did you ever think about giving up?

PIERRE:

Yes, a few times. When we didn't have cash anymore, we were close to breaking point, and thought *this is the last go, we only have two months of cash*. Another day we were really exhausted and tired of all the problems and issues we had to deal with every day. And I remember we had this really weird conversation - we had dinner together, and the topic was, *how do we stop*. And the conclusion was, *ok we're stopping, it's sad but we need to stop and pull the plug and terminate everything*. We felt really bad and we were working like dogs and we didn't have any pleasure in that, and didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel. For some reason I can't explain, the next day we came back and said, *"how do we stop stopping?!"* And we kept discussing, and the conversation started to turn around to how can we solve this.

GUY:

I wonder if just the decision to stop released the pressure that you were putting on yourself, which then gave you the reason to find a way through?

PIERRE:

I think you're right.

GUY:

So that kind of pressure, which is often self-induced - how do you manage that. Do you look after your mental health?

PIERRE:

More and more I'm more intentional about this. When we went through the situation I just explained, we weren't mature enough to manage the level of stress and mental health, and now I think we are... so now I know I need to go climbing and to take time for myself. You need, also, a good support system around you - friends, family, partner, whoever it is - it's really important to build this support system, because I don't think you can go through such lows without people around you. Then it's really about releasing the pressure, blowing steam off and finding the things and places and activities that will help you do so.

Coaching, mentorship, and mental health support is helpful, and I think it makes you a better person - happier and a better leader.

I think there are a couple of phases. The first one when you go from 10-15 people to 20-30 and you start having middle managers... and this is a key moment in the history of the company, as some people aren't in direct touch with founders and you start having management and communication issues... You start to need to be stricter about how you communicate with teams. Then we had an interesting moment around 100-150 people... This is when you start to have newcomers and employees and you don't know them. You can remember maybe 100 people but overall you cannot. It's a bit weird and you see people and you don't know them, but they know you...

GUY:

It's like the military - a company is 60 people. Then it becomes a whole regiment. Hundreds of years of human behaviour says that eventually you have to let go.

PIERRE:

When you go to next level, your own job changes dramatically. And the skills required to do well are totally different. At first, you need to do your magic - code and sell, and do it yourself and be really good at it. Then you need to start managing... then you need to start managing managers, which is totally different. Then you need to start to convey messages, basically - to tell and repeat what we need to do, the strategy and to design the organisation and to communicate, communicate, communicate...

We say, internally, if people don't say they're so bored by us repeating the same stuff over and over, it isn't enough. People need to be fed up by us talking about the mission and principles and strategy, because we realised, if you're not at that level, it's not enough.

BREAK

GUY:

So investors... I see so many founders struggle, because it's so far removed from the instinct, that it becomes a huge emotional blocker to developing the company... So apart from money, which obviously most investors bring, which allows you to invest in the business and take it further towards your mission driven goals - what else do you get from investors that you value?

PIERRE:

Support. Challenging your views and strategy. Sounding board. Contacts and intros. We had investors who helped tremendous commercial intros, doing business in B2B, connections to experts or suppliers, and also recruiting plans. And money is nice, too! Also, the last thing I'd like to add is benchmarks - you know, *we've seen 15 companies in your case and this is the way most of them did it and they were successful, but in those three cases there were some big failures... just want to bring that to your table!*

GUY:

Is there anything you would want from investors that you've never seen available? Anything you would think, *wow that would make a difference?*

PIERRE:

I think investors say they will bring a lot of value to the strategy, and help with talent and commercial introductions, but most of them are not helping at all with talent and intros... like, once a year they give you an email address... Ridiculous. Most of them will not be helpful with strategy, they ask the wrong questions, and you spend lots of time explaining why it's useless to you. So you need to really find the right fit, meaning the right people you want to do business with for many years because you respect them and they understand your business, and you know they're going to generate value.

I wish I would see more investors being aggressive, but not in a bad way - more like, *let's do it and grow this business fast, but at the same time think about impact... think about the social good, the mission.* We feel like many impact investment firms are, like, this is almost the cherry. It's a bit passive. If you're growing at 10% it's a huge success, and on the other hand you might have growth and PE firms saying you need to grow by 50% or 100% but they might not care about impact - it could be some CSR thing to look fancy, but it's not very deep. I wish there were more people like this.

GUY:

Yes, it's that impact investing with pace and hustle.

PIERRE:

Exactly, so how can we build unicorns? We're a public benefit corporation and impactful, but how can we build that? I think we can. I mean, we are...

GUY:

So it's a pretty fast-changing world we live in, even before Covid - how do you stay at the leading edge, how do you spot changes?

PIERRE:

A lot of reading. Press articles. Books. I keep my finger on the pulse. I want to know everything about education, employment, the future of work, tech companies, everywhere in the world. So it's a lot of information. You can spot weak signals and see trends and be readier when they actually arrive in your market.

And also I like to have direct feedback directly with customers, users, students, employees. When you start being a CEO with a very large team, you can have feedback only through the chain of command, but I like to work down at the office or talk to clients and stay in direct touch with the real business. I really enjoy that, first of all, but it's really insightful, because you stay relevant, basically.

GUY:

OpenClassrooms in ten years' time, what does that look like?

PIERRE:

So in five years' time, we've said we want to train and make graduate and place in the workforce one million students per year. So that's the scale we want to reach, and it means it's a multi-billion business. In ten years - I think we'll be the market leader in the world on all verticals, and this is what we're trying to build. We need to keep pushing the boundaries - more geographies, more jobs, more fields of study, and keep growing. Be even more impactful and intentional towards the populations who we think do not have access to education, because it is our mission to make education accessible so we need to be extremely intentional to help the populations who don't have access.

GUY:

And what about you as an individual in ten years' time... apart from the CEO of this huge, multi-billion dollar global leader, any interests beyond that?

PIERRE:

I'll be 41! I'll be done! No, I don't know, we'll see, I hope to be up to the challenge and to be able to upskill along the way so I can manage such an amazing company in ten years. And I want to keep doing my outdoorsy activities. Another thing I'm passionate about is ecology and climate change. If I had another challenge around impact, it'll be impact around the environment.

GUY:

And if you were giving advice to the 11 year-old Pierre, what would it be?

PIERRE:

I'd say, *close your eyes as it's going to be tough!* Keep doing what you do, and don't stop. Insist on that. We were so close to giving up, but now we don't regret it, but it's easy to say now, but never give up - this is the key to your success and achieving your dreams.

BREAK

GUY:

So a few quickfire questions... Favourite book?

PIERRE:

[The Fall by Albert Camus](#). A classic of French literature.

GUY:

Most inspiring or inspirational person?

PIERRE:

I'd say most influential is [John Chambers](#), former CEO of Cisco, one of my mentors for a bit of time. He's brilliant. He pushed me to improve myself and he's very inspiring the way he built Cisco and made it grow, and the way he manages.

GUY:

How did you meet him?

PIERRE:

I met him at a conference in Paris. I reached out, started to chat and I told him I'm in the States next month, and we met and one thing led to another and I asked if we can meet regularly. If you're smart in the way you approach people, it works. My experience is, people will help.

GUY:

Don't be scared, reach out for your heroes. Most important quality for a founder and entrepreneur?

PIERRE:

Resilience. The ability to learn quickly. It's connected to humility, to remain humble, because you can't learn something you think you're good at. You need to accept you're not really good or you don't know it to be able to learn. And the raw capacity to learn fast, I think is really important.