

# The Importance of Continuing Education for Business Leaders

Lucien Letayf Jr. talks to BUSINESS LIFE about the value of continued education for persons in leadership positions at well-established corporations such as Libano-Suisse Insurance. He discusses his experience after having received two certifications from executive education programs at Harvard University, the oldest university in the United States of America, which in August 2017 was again recognized as the top ranked university worldwide in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (Shanghai Ranking)

**A**mong 500 ranked universities, Harvard has now claimed this honor for 15 years running. Having pumped out distinguished graduates for 375 years, with countless business leaders and entrepreneurs among them up to tech icons Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook was created at the university), Harvard is also the alma mater of presidents, some of the most noted ones in the 20th and 21st century being Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States (1901-1909); Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the 35th President, and Barak Obama, the 44th President.

Libano-Suisse is a pioneer in the insurance industry in the Middle East and Gulf region, and a market leader in its home market of Lebanon. With a strong capital base, sound financial management, a skilled and dedicated team of over 250 and the backing of internationally reputed reinsurers, the company prides itself to offer all its clients the protection they require. Libano-Suisse is renowned for insisting to provide its legendary service to every client, be his needs large or small. In the area of motor insurance, for example, the company will serve the customer who requires just a standard third-party liability policy as readily as the customer who asks for a no-fault extra comprehensive cover because he wants total freedom of worry over the most luxurious sedan on the market.

As a smart and sensitive insurer, Libano-Suisse keenly listens to its customers and has the fitting answer for their changing needs in today's changeable world. The company took notice how the rise in both the demand for and the cost of healthcare delivery and insurance policies have been burdening its policy holders. Seeing a growing need for lean healthcare-focused offerings, Libano-Suisse therefore embarked on a journey that took it to improving patient experiences through decreasing and controlling costs. Lean thinking, focused on reduction of errors and improvement of employee productivity, has enabled the company to maintain the provision of superior healthcare coverage without any compromise.

As its home country, Lebanon has to overcome more than just economic obstacles, operating in a challenging market in a challenging industry means for Libano-Suisse to take a proactive approach to problems and decisively address challenges as well as new opportunities. The company and its chief executive have been vocal in calling for enhancements to national insurance legislation in Lebanon, for the improved structuring of insurance offerings and for stringency in supervision of crucial consumer insurance segments like motor



**Interview:** *Lucien Letayf Jr., Chief Executive Officer and Director General of Libano-Suisse Group*



### Continuing education leaders explore new roles within the institutions:

*Lucien Letayf Jr., Chief Executive Officer and Director General of Libano-Suisse Group*

and health by the Insurance Control Commission at the Ministry of Economy and Trade. As new opportunities loom on the horizon for Lebanese insurers through the emergence of an oil & gas industry with offshore and onshore exploration projects, Libano-Suisse supports the creation of a national energy insurance pool. The company is taking an active interest in the increase of human capital in the Lebanese insurance sector and it contributes to its home country through numerous initiatives in culture and corporate social responsibility.

In an exclusive interview, BUSINESS

LIFE Editor-in-Chief speaks to Lucien Letayf Jr., Chief Executive Officer and Director General of Libano-Suisse Group, about his new two diplomas from Harvard University, the concerns and challenges facing the insurance industry and the important developments at the present time.

Lucien Letayf Jr. leads one of the Arab's largest corporations. Leading a team or group is a real skill that takes time, thought and dedication. Leadership makes the difference between success and failure. His charisma and clear vision helped him in maximizing the chances of success in an increasingly-complicated, competitive

and ruthless business world and thus raising Libano-Suisse Group, Insurance Company to new heights and placing it in new markets.

### **BL: Is higher education a stepping stone to become more successful? Are the region's business leaders grabbing this timely opportunity?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** I know that many corporations in the Middle East are sending their employees from middle or even junior management to participate in a variety of trainings. Some are required, for example compliance trainings for career-minded employees in the Lebanese banking industry and increasingly now also governance trainings for board members of listed companies. Other trainings are for personal opportunity enhancement and professional improvement. Having earned such diplomas and certification can indubitably contribute to one's career but I can tell you that career enhancement is not the reason why CEOs of Middle Eastern corporations would enroll in a program as I did in 2016 and 2017 when I took time and went to Harvard Business School for two programs, one being titled General Management Program "GMP 20" with duration of several months and the other a shorter program on Global Strategic Management "GSM".

Ideas that were conveyed in these two programs brought me to an even deeper appreciation of the roles of disruptive innovation and digitalization of the financial services industry in general and in the insurance sector in particular. The program furthermore instilled me with a crystal clear view how important it is for all leaders in today's business world to keep up to date and understand all new management insights. In the insurance industry with its impending transformations in the digital age, it is of utmost priority to anticipate the trends of tomorrow and stay ahead of the wave, instead of being lost among those who are late to adoption of new insights and risk their own extinction.

I want to add one more thing. Of course you are right that Harvard is one of the top universities, not only in the United States but in the world and is still number 1 this year. Still, visiting a good university that is close to you in terms of culture, geography or affordability can be just as rewarding for your life and career as attending a big name like Harvard. I would like to illustrate this by telling you how I partnered with the Beirut-based Ecole Supérieure des Affaires, a leading business school in the Middle East, for a program named Cercle des Dirigeants. In this new program, which was created with an MOU between ESA and the CDD in December of 2016, ESA specifically



**A challenge in filling critical positions:** *Lucien Letayf Jr., Chief Executive Officer and Director General of Libano-Suisse Group*

targets Lebanese and regional corporate leaders who are eager to apply high strategic schemes in their companies.

Through a combination of corporate leaders' personal development and exploration of a road map that guides decision makers through all strategic aspects of their organizations' journey, such as such as governance and financial intelligence, the CDD program allows participants to establish a new development vision of their company. The yearly program includes 5 modules and concludes with a study excursion to Paris, offering to participants a unique opportunity to network with highly ranked French leaders in the field.

Culminating in a certification award at the end of the program, the CDD idea is the integration of graduates in a permanent business club that will allow Lebanese and regional leaders to participate in conferences, panel discussions and other various meetings that will foster a positive work dynamic and create synergies with Lebanese and international groups. I have the honor to serve as the CDD's founding president.

**BL: Is it true that business leaders with higher levels of education tend to have better managerial skills and updated approach to tackle better business plans and innovative business horizon?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** I cannot provide you with any statistics on the relative performance of managers before and after they participate

in an advanced tertiary education program, nor can I tell you to what extent any university education will enable a person to be a good and ethical leader of a business. One can get training in the writing of a business plan. Good leadership, however, is a whole complex that involves managerial authority, business knowledge, personal ethics, interpersonal skills, social responsibility, environmental awareness and possibly many other things. What I can say is that in our day and age, and especially in the Middle East – I say especially, because this region is still at a disadvantage when it comes to reputations and recognitions of our many capable people – I think one has to work on continuous self-improvement and pursuit of higher understanding, whether as a CEO and board member, middle manager, politically active leader, or a professional in insurance, banking, media, even public administration or any other field.

**BL: Why do you continue your education beyond high university diplomas? What options are available?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** See the answer above for my reasons to continue my education as a professional and also note that many years after obtaining my MBA degree from ESA – ESCP Europe, I felt that: a) it is no longer feasible for any professional in the world to think they can do without continued training; and b) that I personally find learning something new to be one of the most stimu-

lating experiences in life. I also am not impervious to the perks involved, such as acquiring the status of Harvard Alumnus and I like the Harvard Business School vision that is encapsulated in the HBS mission to “educate leaders who make a difference in the world”.

To give you the complete picture here, I feel that by belonging to Harvard I gained a new family of peers in the two programs, the GMP 20 and the GSM. When you attend the HBS campus, you feel that your mind wants to soar, that you are eager for knowledge, and that you win new self-confidence. And at the time you gain a sense of humility and I was filled with emotion when the dean of HBS told me, “Lucien, welcome to the family.” I am proud to think that I am even at this moment a member of the big Harvard family and its beautiful network all over the world. As my peers and friends in my programs and like the many brilliant people at Harvard,

I want to be a “leader that makes a real difference in the world”, and I also want to say clearly that the leader is she or he who gives more than he takes. As to the second part of your question about the options available for further professional training, please do your research on the myriad programs that are offered for continued education on all levels. These are available from specialized academies, from our reputed universities in the Middle East (like ESA Business School in Beirut) as well as from universities in Europe and universities in the United States besides Harvard – but also on other continents.

**BL: How will your new diplomas enable you to focus on the knowledge and practical skills required to design, deploy and mature a robust capability to successfully lead change in the way insurance and reinsurance services need to be managed and delivered in the 21st century?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** Ask me again after I have put my new knowledge and skill into practice for several years. I am passionate about helping Libano-Suisse scale new heights as the insurer of choice in the Middle East. I am determined to do my very best to fulfill my mandate as CEO of Libano-Suisse Insurance Group and it is my intention that this company will achieve even more than mastering the challenges that you refer to in your question. And I truly believe that by sharing experiences with my managerial

peers at CDD and HBS will be very enriching to us all in the short and in the long term. Through our interaction, we will determine and define the best strategies and find the best solutions to all the new challenges that industries are facing in our region.

**BL: Is it true that creativity, innovation and passion that current business leadership possesses can be an inspiration to future business leaders?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** Yes, it is true. As humans, we all tend to look for role models. Just as our parents do for many citizens who (more often than not) are very lucky to grow up in good families and enjoy schools where their teachers provide them with encouragement as well as discipline, it is undeniable that great business leaders will inspire the leaders who have their examples to follow. It is not for nothing that we love reading the life stories of international top managers, whether it is an autobiography like the legendary Lee Iacocca's or a biography like Walter Isaacson's book about Steve Jobs.

I think that there are countless ways in which we can be inspired by the examples and experiences of great CEOs in any industry and that it is a worthy aspiration for any current business leader to become an example her or himself. After all, it is not the money or the business model practiced by a company that will be remembered but the example of the business's social achievements and community services that one can offer to members of a future generation.

**BL: It is said that it is tough to join and get accepted by Harvard University, how did you achieve this goal?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** I think there may be a misperception that Harvard and other Ivy League schools are only for elites of one or the other kind, like the white American moneyed male or the academic super-achiever with perfect GPA score. There are places for further education of the best and brightest and one such very special place is Harvard, of course, but Harvard also has developed a large number of short intensive programs and workshops and very specific trainings for women leaders, NGO leaders, young entrepreneurs and the like.

The programs that I participated in are part of the Executive Education Program at Harvard Business School. The requirements for enrollment are focused on job experience as CEO and the more extensive program of the two in which I participated in 2016 "GMP 20" has according to Harvard been "designed for general managers in any industry who have overall profit and loss responsibility". Formal requirements or college scores are of less importance when it comes to study in a group of such distinguished peers, many of whom

have over fifteen years experiences as CEO or senior managerial experience.

**BL: How will you apply the application of the concepts that you recently acquired to the staff and customers of your own organization?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** To the best of my abilities and with the support of the great team at Libano-Suisse.

**BL: How will you be better exposed to the continuing expansion of digital insurance and risk management in the age of big data and information?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** Digitization of insurance is a multi-layered issue that touches all areas of operations, from distribution channels, customer interaction, and design of cyber-insurance policies to the important issue of defending our customer data against attacks by hackers and cyber-crime syndicates. These issues are high on the attention lists of insurance executives in the Middle East, as demonstrated by a recent conference on this topic that was held jointly by GAIF and ACAL in Beirut. We are following new developments and do our part at Libano-Suisse to use big data, artificial intelligence, and digitization to the optimal benefit of our insured clients, our employees and our shareholders.

**BL: Saying the above, are you going to introduce new plans to Libano-Suisse? What are these new plans and strategies?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** We will of course employ digitization to better serve our brokers and clients, but before I elaborate more on this point, let me address our innovations in the two business lines that are of greatest importance to the largest numbers of people in our customer base.

Health is everyone's concern. We are well aware of our positioning towards the upper tier in the Lebanese and regional market for health insurance, where our policies and covers have never been the cheapest bargains. What we strive for is for Libano-Suisse to be the first in the market for quality health insurance and be "the company of reference" for health insurance standards in the Middle East. We pioneered for example – together with our TPA partner GlobeMed – cross-border regional coverage of our insured, assuring them of ready care from top doctors, clinics and hospitals. We invite you to investigate this story in greater detail, but let me reveal here that we are further enhancing our health insurance product by adding new services for the convenience of our customers. Life, even in its stressful moments, will be made as comfortable for them as can be.

If you look at general insurance premiums, motor insurance is the second

most important coverage area in Lebanon and of similar importance in practically every market in the Middle East. For many, their car is not only essential for securing their ability to get to work and thus their livelihood but also represents a cherished item of personal property. That is why we have recently upgraded the coverage offered through our motor insurance products Markaba and Markaba Plus. We are now granting full car replacement for high-value vehicles and are adding coverage of damage from natural perils without any limitation. Just think about floods and rainstorms. We are also providing partial theft coverage for external parts with a limitation and we can offer our clients a new policy rider that covers political violence up to the total value of the insured vehicle.

Returning to digitization, let me reiterate that social media are an undeniable part of everyone's future. I said this back in 2014 when we were beginning to implement a far-reaching strategy to develop our digital communication and distribution channels. Having invested into a new online platform, we delved into building our mobile channels. Designed to grow rapidly right from the start, the Libano-Suisse digital presence empowers customers to purchase products online, and obtain insurance advice and services with all the ease that we can offer.

As the past few years have seen digital soar above what we imagined, we are currently developing a new mobile application to optimize the service offered to our clients. This app will also facilitate the work of insurance brokers by enabling them to request quotations and renewing their policies online. We are fully on course to achieve the objective of our digital strategy, which is to create a virtual space for Libano-Suisse and reach an optimal position on the cloud.

**BL: What do you comment on the ongoing events in Lebanon, the region and the United States? How will these events impact the business in Lebanon, the region and the globe?**

**LUCIEN LETAYF JR.:** Many people have many things to say about geopolitics and regional events. Some even are experts. For myself, I will leave such comments to those who believe that they are qualified to analyze or predict things on such grand scales. I can only add that global predictions usually do not prove very accurate. As to Lebanon, it is a great country. We all hope for its best, as many good indications are now coming together – from a better outlook for the safety of all people here to expectations for regional reconstruction, for our oil & gas industry and for many exciting new beginnings in our democracy ...