



SYLVIE GUINARD

**THE CULTURE OF
GOING FORWARD**

For the past few years, Sylvie Guinard, CEO of Thimonnier, has been accumulating honors. Chevalier à l'Ordre National du Mérite in 2013, and Laureate of the Or Nationale des Femmes de l'Economie in 2016, she was also the recipient of the 2013 La Tribune Women's Award in Industry. Combined with her energy and her persuasiveness, these honors show a "serial entrepreneur" who has found her niche in a men's world, that of engineers and industry, with an approach of an "iron fist in a velvet glove". We see another Sylvie Guinard, one full of questions, close to her employees, endowed with a true community spirit and deeply in touch with her feelings, which are her driving force.

What gives meaning to your career and your professional commitment?

Mechanics is the obvious leitmotiv of my career. Whether it is for an assault tank, an oil platform, the space industry, trucks or packaging, we work on the mechanisms and on setting things in motion. Even though the jargon and expertise is different, the environment remains the same. At Thimonnier, which manufactures flexible packaging machines, we work without problems for a wide range of industries, such as agri-food, detergents, cosmetics, medical and welding. The business markets are different, but the technological solutions we use are very similar. In fact, a deeper continuity of my career lies elsewhere. I've come to realize it in the last couple of years, following the remark of a colleague about my beginnings and my passion for space. This person told me: *"Sylvie, I don't think you're a space enthusiast. You are an explorer of uncharted territories."* It took me several years to really grasp what that implied, but I understood that he was right. It is true that I'm especially interested in the unknown. Discovery is my pivot. And in those uncharted territories that I'd love to clear, the human being takes a very important place.

You are an engineer at heart. Where is this interest in the human factor coming from and why did you make it an integral part of your approach?

Before taking over the helm at Thimonnier, I wanted to be better prepared so I followed an MBA course. This included subjects on personal development, which taught me a lot about myself and about human interactions. So I took up my role at Thimonnier differently, basing it on the idea, which was completely new to me at the time, that the company's value lay not just in its technical expertise, but above all in the sum of talents of its employees. Of course the human factor is often exhausting, but it is also very stimulating.

And it has several consequences for how I execute my job at Thimonnier. The first lies in the priority I give to the employees' diversity and the wealth it brings to the company. I'm not just talking about gender or age, but about different cultures. We have fourteen different nationalities at Thimonnier with a range of educational backgrounds.

The second consequence is that I'm a manager who delegates a lot, or at least I try to empower everyone. It isn't my role to take over what the employees are doing, but to help them grow and feel fulfilled. Because I trust their expertise, I expect them to come up with proposals and not limit themselves to just executing their tasks. Only then can we make progress and innovate in our professions.

Speaking about innovation, you also put a lot of your time and energy into innovation and the Industry of the Future. What does that mean to you?

Again, it is the challenge of inventing the unknown! With a very concrete reality at stake: that of knowing what place we will give industry in our Society (with a capital S) project of the future. Today, we consider that a job in the industrial sector can create ten more around it. The same holds true the other way around. If I apply this reflection to Thimonnier, and in keeping with my values, my role is to stimulate the dynamic that will keep the company in Lyon, because economically it still makes sense. So that tomorrow our children can still find a job in an impelling and flourishing industrial sector.

I am convinced that in order to stabilize and redevelop our industry, we must have a powerful tool in which to reinvest. To achieve this, we must be agile, and not try to catch up but take a new direction. This is what I initiated at Thimonnier, asking each employee to be open-minded, to change their position, based on the idea that it is no longer possible to innovate alone. This implies learning to work with skills that we don't have, to create a new collaborative model that makes 1+1=3!



What is your take on the issue of the place of women in the industry of the future?

I absolutely do not recognize myself in a feminist framework, systematically demanding an equal position for women everywhere. However, I agree that there should be diversity in all professions. By bringing women into technical design offices and workshops, for example, and men in secretarial functions, because that will bring back a truly new way of thinking in how to organize and work as a team. This is also true for executive and management functions, which still see few women, and for a reason... there is such a limited number of candidates. Even if girls are interested in the industrial sector, they refrain from opening its door, often conditioned by their parents' views. The challenge of the Industry of the Future is to show women the real face of the industrial sector. Personally, I love being a woman in industry.

Why did you choose to become a mechanical engineer and then manager of an industrial manufacturing company for packaging machines?

It started with a childhood dream. Being extremely curious, I would have loved to become a criminal investigator, ER surgeon or helicopter pilot. But in the end, I preferred to be an astronaut. At the time, the best way to be an astronaut was to become a fighter pilot, but that school was closed to women. So I looked for something that was somehow related to aeronautics. With a choice between space physician and space engineer, I chose the engineer. At the end of my studies at ESTACA (Technical University of Aeronautics and Automobile Construction) I worked with the National Center for Space Studies on the validation of the Ariane 5 flight program. I was part of the entire qualification saga of the first Ariane 5, including the first flight, which unfortunately crashed.

I landed my first job in the Alsace with a company manufacturing one of the critical components of the Ariane 5 launcher. I stayed there for five years and then worked on other projects, such as the Leclerc assault tank and nuclear-powered attack submarines. Each time it was about very critical applications where you needed to come up with new solutions. I loved that period. But then my husband, who worked for Alstom, got promoted to Lyon, so I resigned.

How did you bounce back in Lyon?

I wanted to position myself as a business engineer, but the market was not mature enough. I was about to set up my own company when my grandfather approached me about the Thimonnier family business, which I hardly knew at all. He was looking for a successor within the family. As I wasn't familiar with the company, I accepted on the condition that we would keep the possibility to go our separate ways if it wouldn't work out. I joined Thimonnier in 2002 and unfortunately that period until 2006 was a real descent into hell. We were one week away from declaring bankruptcy. The workforce shrunk from 130 to less than 50. I held out for two reasons. First of all, it was a question of pride. I did not want to fail the challenge my grandfather had given me. But more importantly, my father and several uncles were still working for the company. It would have been very difficult for them to find another job. In the end, my attachment prevailed. The company has been around for 150 years, with the Doyen family at the helm for over a century and I am part of the 5th generation.


What stamp did you put on the company when you arrived? What were your priorities?

In the first few years, I was more a manager than an entrepreneur. I had a somewhat distant approach to the situation. I really focused on what was necessary for the company. It was a difficult exercise, deciding which limbs to cut to be able to preserve the company in the future. It hurt, because Thimonnier is a human-scale company, so I know each individual employee, of some even their families and their situation. But we had to keep going. So I asked the question how we could economically function with less than 50 people. Then I started to clean up the liquid assets and we were able to relaunch R&D, once I was able to assure the employees that there would be no further redundancy plan. It took us almost three years to make the red lights disappear and to bring confidence back into the company, which was crucial to me.

“Discovery is my pivot. And in those uncharted territories that I'd love to clear, the human being takes a very important place”



Thimonnier houses one of the largest private collections of sewing machines in France. All are still in perfect working condition. Among the twenty references present is of course one of the three remaining French copies of the original “Barthélémy Thimonnier”, which was patented in 1830. Each piece is unique: the materials, mechanisms, colors and finishes were customized for each seamstress. Sylvie Guinard's favorite is a unique model working without energy input... and with a clockwork mechanism.

A woman with short brown hair, wearing a black blazer over a light-colored top and a necklace with a large, abstract, metallic pendant. She is gesturing with her hands as if speaking. The background shows a window with a view of a green field and buildings.

**“The factory
of tomorrow
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In 2013 you bought the company. Why?

The challenge I set for myself was to launch the company in a dynamic of innovation and professionalism in order to reconnect with a growth model. Thimonnier employees have always strived for excellence. However, technology is evolving so quickly that it is rapidly becoming obsolete. To think that we can follow the movement alone is an illusion to our employees, which should lead us to look for other resources and other, complementary profiles. On top of that, I am convinced that the innovation of tomorrow will in part be based on design thinking, while a large number of Thimonnier employees still think in technical instead of functional solutions. Everyone needs to adapt.

It is not easy, because this strategy calls for a complete cultural change among employees who were used to cultivating craftsmanship. We are breaking up an existing model to migrate to a model that we don't have yet.

On a daily basis, what levers do you implement to accompany Thimonnier employees in this transformation?

In order to get people to work together, I created a new, completely cross-functional pilot service, which includes the professions we are already familiar with and others that didn't exist before. Above all, the teams are involved in a very rich training and coaching program that concerns all the strata of the company, including the board of directors, as it is essential that its members have a common language to make immediate progress. Another part of the training program tackles the company's processes. All these support programs ultimately aim to help Thimonnier become a permanent member of the movement.

It is a real training shock. We went from 1,500 hours of training for 50 to 55 employees in 2014 to more than 290 requests for professional training for 70 employees and 2,100 hours of allocated training in 2016. It is necessary to give time and means to each individual to make them understand that they have regained their comfort zone and that they can start going forward.

Do you see the company's future in Lyon?

80% of our market is international, which is in line with our positioning of high-end and innovative packaging machines. The investment machine market has slowed down considerably in France. In this context, the geographical positioning of the company is not an issue for our customers. On the other hand, it is a strong point for us. We design tailor-made machines that cannot be found elsewhere, and that are equipped with the best components and manufactured with local partners to help us further improve our products.

Thimonnier's integration in the Lyon area is historical; it is the cradle of its success. Barthélémy Thimonnier, the inventor of the sewing machine, started its story in Amplepuis. Relying on a varied pool of quality mechanical subcontractors, with whom we've been working for a long time, we make almost all our purchases locally. To us, Lyon represents a pool of high-level skills, schools, and training courses, to which we are loyal and that respond perfectly to our needs. In addition, geographically it is a rather centrally located region.

What does Mrs. "Thimonnier" do when she isn't running the company?

Some people take up sports, I sing, and I sing a lot. I've always sung. At first, I sang classical repertoire. For the last ten years, I have sung popular music in a choir - le Chœur Val de Saône in Jassans, between Lyon and Villefranche. I can't imagine being part of another choir. The high level of demand from our choirmaster is not so much about singing technique but about interpretation of the songs. It made me rediscover the French language and above all grasp a totally different way of singing. I do exactly the opposite of everything I learned in classical singing. The challenge of popular repertoire is to interpret a text as to tell a story and make it come to live for the listeners. The text is central. You need to give it a lot of warmth and nuances, which means playing with different volumes and emotions. Popular repertoire is very technical, it does not need the power as expected in classical singing. In classical singing, I was soprano and soloist, with a very crystalline, cool, almost disembodied voice that could fill an entire church. Popular singing allowed me to discover a voice I didn't know and to connect with a whole new range of emotions. I dedicate as much free time to it as my work will permit.

Do you personally call Lyon home? Does the Lyon region meet the curiosity and thirst for diversity that seem to define you?

I have a rather simple lifestyle and the Lyon region suits me perfectly. My base camp is more nature than city, it's in the Beaujolais, where I live. When I need to recharge, I like to get some peace and quiet with a book in the hammock in our garden. I especially need space, a horizon, and endless scenery. But my husband and I don't live an isolated life; we spent a lot of time with friends, and also like going out to see performances. I have really spent some exceptional evenings, full of emotion. I recently went to see Pixel, a hip-hop performance, for the second time. Pure poetry!