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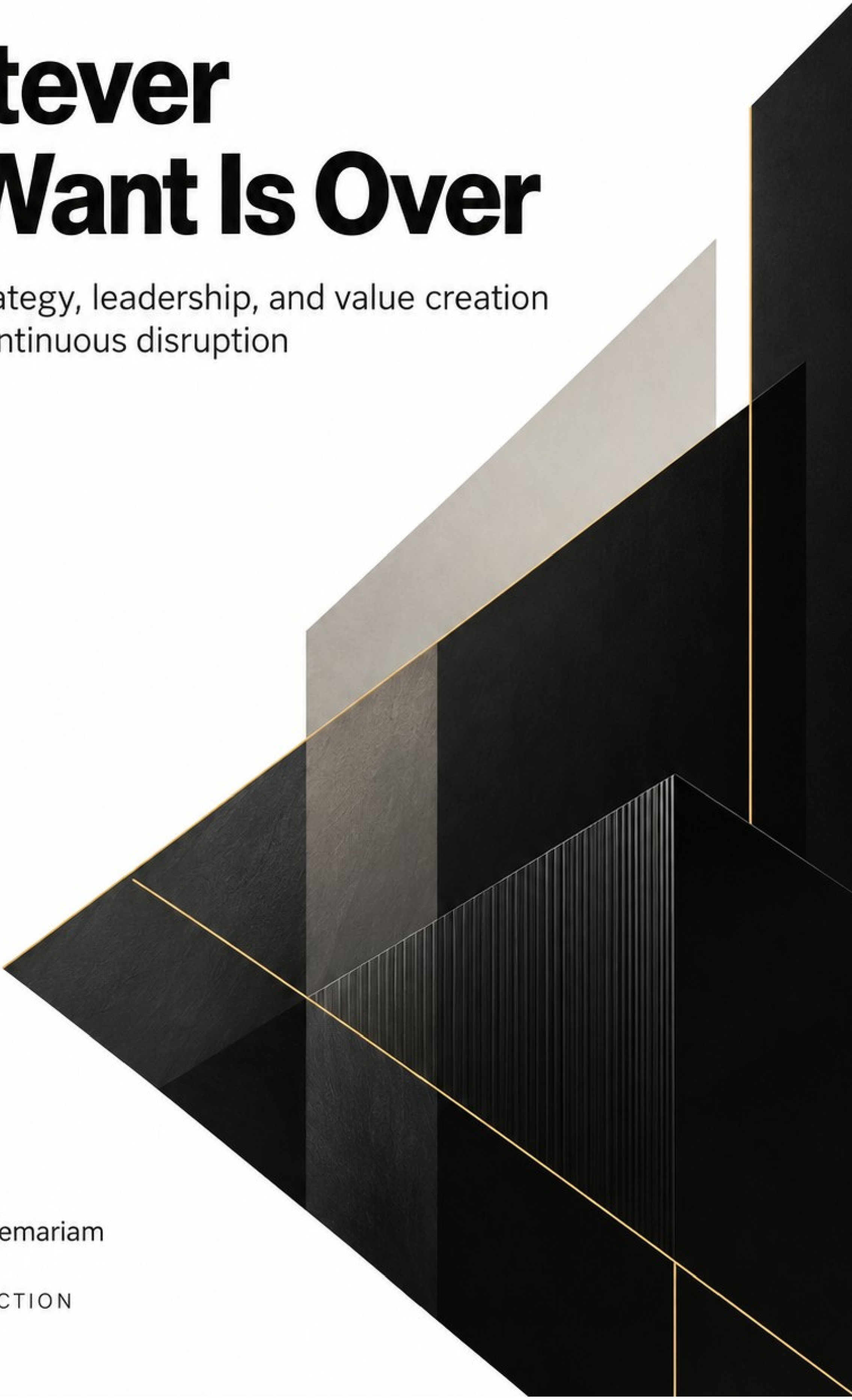
Whatever You Want Is Over

Rethinking strategy, leadership, and value creation in an age of continuous disruption



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KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION

‘‘Whatever You Want’’ Is Over

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Regulators, investors, and people are reshaping the business landscape. Governments around the world are introducing new laws that require companies to report their environmental and social impact. The old days of saying ‘‘whatever you want’’ are over. If you do not report, you are out of compliance. And compliance is becoming the price of doing business. Money is moving toward companies that take ESG seriously. Investors, including banks and shareholders, are asking tough questions. They want to know how you treat the planet, your people, and your governance. If you ignore ESG, you pay more to borrow money, or you do not get funding at all. People are watching. Your customers, your employees, and your community care about what you stand for. They reward honesty and punish greenwashing. Trust is not given anymore; it must be earned. These forces are not working alone. They are coming together. And they are turning ESG from a nice-to-have into a must-have. The message is simple: ESG is not a burden. It is an opportunity.

Yet SMEs and start-ups around the world struggle to adapt to the new ESG reality. For example, in Europe, they are drowning in paperwork. New regulations like the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) demand detailed sustainability reporting, but small businesses lack the resources to keep up. 26% of European SMEs identify environmental reporting requirements as a significant challenge, while 53% have no climate-neutrality strategy and are not planning to develop one. In Africa, the barrier is cost. ESG compliance is expensive. Standards designed for large corporations do not reflect African realities. These are not the same problems, but they share the same result.

The root of the problem is a deeper disconnect between what is expected and what is possible. Unlike large companies, SMEs have limited budgets, lean teams, and competing priorities. When a new regulation arrives, they do not have the luxury of months of preparation. They react, often poorly, and hope it is enough. But it is not enough anymore. The stakes are rising. Big businesses are asking for ESG data before signing contracts with SMEs and startups. Banks are factoring ESG scores into loan decisions. Governments are linking public tenders to sustainability performance. The message is simple: the longer SMEs and start-ups wait, the harder it becomes.

The choice is clear. Entrepreneurs and SME managers can do nothing and hope the pressure fades, but it will not. They can treat ESG as a box-ticking exercise, but that will not protect them. They can delay action, arguing that compliance costs too much. But the real cost of doing nothing is far greater than lost clients, higher borrowing costs, exclusion from markets, and falling out of favor with regulators. Or they can seize ESG as a strategic opportunity to build trust, attract investment, and secure their future. The companies that act now will shape the markets of tomorrow. The question is whether they will lead, follow, or fall behind.

The clock is ticking…