

IEDC Faculty: Learning from the best



A School with a View

25th January 2016

Prof. Derek Abell

“WE COULD LEAD THE WORLD, IF WE ONLY PUT OUR MINDS TO IT”

The roots of the relationship between IEDC-Bled School of Management and Prof. Derek Abell go back in late 80's. Those were of course very different times, when even the word “management” was not recognized in Slovenia. Without any doubt, IEDC's Founding President Prof. Danica Purg had a tough mission to fulfil: to prepare a new generation of Slovene and Yugoslav managers to lead enterprises toward a market economy. It was highly important to choose the right people, on whom she could rely. And Professor Abell has been one of the closest advisors to Prof. Purg ever since. They both share a common passion: strong will to contribute to the leadership development for a better world. Prof. Abell has dedicated more than 40 years to leadership education. He has been committed to improving management development practices internationally, with a special interest in emerging markets, including CEE region. Accordingly, in 1991 he was even awarded with Medal of Freedom by then President Mr. Kučan for his contributions to the development of Slovenia.

This blue-eyed professor, who holds a British passport, now lives in Switzerland, he graduated as an aeronautical engineer, but works worldwide, has published five books and wrote more than 100 published case studies; and has guided the development of at least 100 more.

Prof. Abell is known for his professional excellence, intellectual width and depth, accompanied with personal integrity. Not surprisingly that in December 2016, the highest honor IEDC can offer - honorary title Doctor Honoris Causa - was awarded to him. “Not only for his expertise in the field of strategy but with respect to his strive for better management education,” was written in the explanation.

He started his career as a faculty member of the Harvard Business School and later served for nine years as dean of IMEDE (now IMD). Then he was asked to become Founding President of the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT), Berlin, and served as start-up entrepreneur in that role until 2006, building a new campus, a faculty, and total staff of some 100 people.

In 2012, he became International Dean of the newly created HSM Educacao, Sao Paulo, Brazil, with the task of expanding its international reach, and helping build its university network, its faculty, and programs. Currently, he serves as Professor Emeritus at ESMT, coaching younger faculty and professionals in case writing, interactive teaching methods, and research. He has been a board member of CEEMAN since its founding and serves also as President of the CEEMAN IQA Accreditation Committee.

By: Tonja Blatnik, Head of Corporate Communications, IEDC

Being connected to our region for more than 20 years, how would you comment its development in this period?

I have been coming here for the last 25 years. And in this time, I have learned so much. It is a great part of the world, which potential is being realized slowly, but surely. Same goes for Slovenia – things here have been developing too slowly, even though your country has been ahead of many other CEE countries. However, this whole region is going too slowly. There has to be more movement, more change. We have a great danger in Europe in general of being overtaken by events, particularly from Asia. People there are working harder, longer and smarter and they are well educated as well. So, we have to get a move on to retain the lead that we have, potentially.

We have great people and education, but we have to turn it not only into great business, but something good for mankind as well. The potential is here! We could actually lead the world if we only put our minds to it. The leadership of the world is no longer in the US neither in the other parts of so-called developed Europe. The Asian markets are coming up. The real leadership, what I define as the potential to bring together three cultures - the managerial/business culture, the scientific/technological culture, and the humanities - exists here, but we have to move on, before someone else does it before us.

So, how would you define a good leader?

All leaders have to stand on three legs: to have a good sense of science and technology, good sense of business, but should also never lose touch with the humanities. We are and must be grounded by

that. Unfortunately, there are only few leaders truly standing on these three legs.

Are good leaders also defined geographically? What kind of leaders are Slovenes, for example?

I have been teaching executives from all around the world. And I can assure you, that the differences within country are bigger than difference across countries. In every industry or country, I can pick out, in a group of 50 executives, maybe 3 or 4 individuals who really have the potential to lead, and who are ready to step up to the mark. Because, you don't get given leadership, you have to take it. And those numbers are the same in Slovenia, US, Poland, etc. I am always cautious about stereotyping people. However, I would like to see some great companies coming out of Slovenia. And chances are here. We have to acknowledge the idea that small countries can be even better than big ones. Slovenia is small, but so is Singapore or Switzerland, where I live. But it has Novartis and Nestle.

Could you perhaps give us some examples of our good companies?

I can give you one: this school. IEDC is by any measure on the global scale an excellent institution. And it is always moving forward into new things. I have seen it on the move from the very beginning it is being innovative and standing out as a result. The school is Danica Purg in a way.

What will management development look like in the future?

John Kotter once famously said: "Many companies are over-managed and under-led". This is even truer today as change seems to speed up. Management is far from being a science, and we hardly develop concepts fast enough to keep up with the changing challenges, yet alone parameterize these to the point of full-proof statistical testing. There is a pitiful gap between what is apparently being taught about responsible and ethical leadership and what is sadly going on in the real world. Management education's role has to mirror, and - even better - anticipate, these new demands.

For example, we have to move into new industries of the future. Mr. Donald Trump has got it wrong. Trying to keep old line-manufactured jobs in America is like keeping water up in the hills. It always runs down. You can't keep old industries alive.



You also serve as President of the CEEMAN IQA Accreditation Committee. How can international accreditation play a role in shaping these new directions?

It has to! Because there are mighty forces at work pushing in other directions. There is some sort of 'cancer' spreading through our profession that honors overly academic research at the expense of efforts to understand and teach what the future executive will have to deal with in practice. But there are other forc-

es pushing for a Western approach to doing business worldwide. This is equally doomed since both West and East will meet new unfamiliar challenges as the world unfolds in the future. Something is terribly amiss here and one thing I am personal-

ly committed to is to ensure that accredited schools get much closer to real practice and look out for the real impact of what they teach. If this at least could be accomplished, we would make a real mark on the world as a result of our efforts.

Congratulation for the honorary title Doctor Honoris Causa. What does it mean to you?

I am extremely honored and happy. But titles are not the whole story. The real story in life is to do something meaningful.

MEET DEREK PERSONALLY

My family would describe me as ...
... funny.

There's nothing better in life than...
... learning.

My key value is ...
... reliability.

The most powerful lesson I have learned ...
... (as an apprentice, after I left school) is that not all bosses are nice or necessarily supportive!

I am inspired by ...
... insights and feelings from fields other than my own.

If I could change the world, I would start with ...
... (and I always try to do so with respect to things I can personally influence), I would start with education - to avoid populists preying on poorly educated and badly informed people.

