

»MY ROOTS GREATLY INFLUENCE MY DECISION-MAKING AND THE WAY I APPROACH THE DECISIONS OF OTHERS. I GREW UP IN A FAMILY WHERE AUTHORITY WAS RESPECTED.« **MARKO FERENČAK, DIRECTOR, BENEFICIJ D.O.O., SLOVENIA, EMBA 2023-24, SLOVENIA**

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*Interviewed by Vera Pasynkova,
photos: IEDC and Marko Ferenčak*

What inspired your career path, transitioning from family beekeeping business and environmental consulting to a public service management, like waste management plant Brežice, and nowadays to Beneficij Ltd, a company 100%-owned by the diocese of Novo Mesto, under the Catholic church, that manages its assets?

I feel that I am aware of my gifts, abilities, and the opportunities that arise in life. Sometimes, during my career, the decision for a change came about; other times — like in my most recent job — the opportunity presented itself, and I seized it. In life, not everything can be planned and organized the way we entrepreneurs might prefer. Sometimes, we simply need to let things unfold naturally and trust the process.

Tell us a bit more about your family beekeeping business, how did it start, how come all your siblings got involved, who keeps the tradition and business these days and what's your view on beekeeping altogether?

Bees have always been a part of our family's history. There was a brief interruption during my grandparents' generation when the beehive was abandoned during World War II and was not reestablished.

My father, Jože, and my youngest brother, Rok, were the ones who acquired the first bees again; Rok was taking care of the bees independently at just 9 years old, while the rest of us, brothers, helped him during honey harvests.

The year 2013 was a turning point when I took over the beekeeping business and, with a bit of luck and Rok's beekeeping knowledge, created the company Čebelarstvo Ferenčak, which I managed. I remember my brother Jože lending me the funds to buy the first truck with bees, and I recall that I paid him back in full by Christmas. This was followed by the development of our brand, proving quality through various international competitions, and a continuous striving for excellence that continues to this day.

Another pivotal year was 2018 when I fully transferred the beekeeping business to my second youngest brother, Jože, who, as an experienced commercialist, expanded our sales channels. Today, we have a nice family business that is stable and provides a wonderful environment for our families. Each of us siblings has our own role in the company, with responsibilities for the bees, procurement, storage, sales, and communication with

customers.

My view on beekeeping is optimistic, despite the environmental threats that bees face and the climate changes (frosts, heatwaves, strong winds) that beekeepers are very sensitive to. I believe that investing in companies that aim to produce and market live and wholesome food is of strategic importance, and I see a constant perspective in our business, which is more important to us than high short-term profits, something that beekeeping does not allow for.

What do you see as the



biggest challenges in combining a personal entrepreneurial passion (like beekeeping) with a professional venture, and how do you plan to overcome them?

When I took over the family beekeeping business in 2013, I worked all day and a lot at night because the bees are moved from pasture to pasture at night. It was essentially a pure startup. At the same time, I also got married in 2013, and our

children started to be born. My wife and I reached a point where we both realized that this couldn't continue. We both wanted more children, and the priority was clear – family first. I had three solutions: 1. Sell the company, which was difficult because it represents our family identity; 2. Reduce the workload, which didn't feel right, as I wouldn't feel good about working half-heartedly; 3. Reorganize the company – this solution was a challenge that I accepted and implemented. I distributed the work among my brothers and sister and changed the management of the company. I became a secondary member

of the business and took a job at the utility plant Komunala Brežice, where I had an 8-hour long workday, which was a real blessing for the family life. When it comes to maintaining a life balance, I think it's crucial to have clear values. Especially with the first five, you must not forget the order; otherwise, everything can collapse in an instant.

How might the collaboration with IEDC on this honey-production

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project serve as a model for other entrepreneurs or organizations interested in sustainable, community-focused initiatives?

The program at IEDC is somewhat more tailored to students from larger corporations. We learned a lot about organizational structures, strategy, finance, and many “soft skills.” When I enrolled in the school, I had experience from a small family business and had worked for six years at Komunala Brežice d.o.o., which had 100 employees. Many things made sense to me, as I saw a great similarity between the organization of corporations and the organization of a beehive. It is a pyramid system with clearly defined functions. In a beehive, there is incredible optimization of work processes. If people were organized like bees, we would work only 8 minutes a day to achieve the same standards. The organization of bees is a vast topic that we are still exploring, and perhaps IEDC could include it as an interesting aspect in its curriculum. It might be a great idea to have such a course or draw parallels between corporations and beehives. It is evident that the best systems are natural or copied from nature — flora and fauna.

Can you share a defining moment in your career that shaped the way you lead and manage teams today? You mentioned taking a struggling team and turning it into the most efficient department at your previous job in the waste management plant. What leadership principles



or strategies did you apply? What would you do differently nowadays, with the EMBA degree under your belt?

Key to my development in entrepreneurship was the decision to work in a somewhat larger company. I wanted a bigger team and immediately got the opportunity to work in a department with 25 employees. The atmosphere was not good. The team was not homogeneous, there were small sub-teams within the group, poor communication, low educational structure, alcoholism, and even physical confrontations had occurred before my arrival.

The first thing I did was go out into the field with them to see how things stood; this quickly gave me a complete picture. By doing this, I lowered myself to the same level as them and soon gained support from most of the team. I had a few rebels, but it was very important that I was consistent in implementing new rules. Every morning, I held a staff meeting where I personally gave instructions to each employee and resolved all conflict situations myself.

Interestingly, two employees resigned on their own because they saw that things could no

longer continue as before. The team started to follow me, and the efficiency of service delivery began to grow. In all internal surveys, we excelled as a team. This result later allowed me to advance to the position of assistant manager of all public utility services and also to join the company's administration.

I would probably approach such a situation more systematically today, based on the knowledge I gained at IEDC, because I have more information about what constitutes a bad and a good team, where the dangers lie, and I have more analyzed practical examples. Additionally, I have more colleagues I can call at any time to ask how they would react in a certain situation.

How has your background in engineering and environmental sciences influenced your approach to leadership and decision-making?

My roots greatly influence my decision-making and the way I approach the decisions of others. I grew up in a family where authority was respected. I spent a lot of time engaged in music, where rules must be followed, and I find it particularly interesting to analyze the role of a

conductor in an orchestra or choir. I am grateful that during my upbringing, I had good authorities by my side. I learned the violin from Professor Vladimir Zlatko Sverak, who played first violin with the Zagreb Soloists and was a worldly, wonderful pedagogue and mentor. As a student, I worked for a Member of the European Parliament, who was full of wisdom and various interesting insights.

I believe it is very important for a person during their formative years to have authorities to follow, learn from, and gain knowledge from, and then at some point, they can navigate on their own. The Biotechnical Faculty, which is my primary field, did not contribute much in this area. I would say that the topic of decision-making at IEDC was invaluable for me, and I noticed how aware my classmates were of the importance of making different types of decisions. Making strategic decisions or “big bet decisions” is currently one of my business priorities in the position I hold.

What drives you to continually seek new challenges and responsibilities in your professional journey?

For me, it's a pleasure when I create, produce, make, or

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sing something, and when we move things forward in the company. Now, as the CEO, I face many challenges, and I am fortunate that I can be very creative in my work again, and I enjoy it.

Where do you see yourself in five to ten years, and do you think that your recently completed EMBA studies did impact the way you think about your future? In which way?

I currently have many challenges at Beneficij, which I lead. The offer for this position came to me in the middle of the EMBA program, which

understanding of the business landscape but also reinforced the importance of adaptability and innovation in achieving our goals. I am excited about the potential for growth and the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in the organization.

You have experience in both private and public sectors — do you see yourself continuing in public service, or do you envision a return to entrepreneurship?

I want to continue in the private sector because the opportunities for creativity are



greatly contributed to my decision and also to my operational capabilities. This role has allowed me to apply the knowledge and skills I acquired during my studies, particularly in areas such as strategic management, financial analysis, and team leadership. Each day presents new obstacles, from optimizing operations to enhancing team dynamics, and I find great satisfaction in tackling these challenges head-on. The experience has not only deepened my

significantly greater than in the public sector.

How did you find the overall EMBA experience at IEDC? What was the most valuable takeaway? Do you still keep communication with your classmates at the same intensity level as before?

My time over those 17 weeks in Bled has been truly invaluable. Coming into this experience with no formal background in

economics, finance, or strategic management, I found the knowledge we gained to be immensely enriching. These weeks allowed us not only to learn but also to step back from our daily routines and reflect on our actions and behaviors, embracing necessary changes and reaffirming the insights we had already acquired.

I deeply cherish the friendships I formed with my classmates, from whom I learned so much. We were a close-knit team that enjoyed gathering in the evenings over a glass of wine, engaging in lively discussions that often extended late into the night. While we will certainly keep in touch, the nature of our connections may change as life moves on. We already have an internal reunion planned in Belgrade this May, and I'm looking forward to a family vacation with one of my classmates soon after. Over these two years, we have truly forged beautiful bonds that I will always treasure.

Any class or outside of class moments and memories that immediately pop up in your mind when anyone asks you about IEDC?

Memories first rush to the people I met – the professors and classmates. The efforts we had to make to balance work so that we could attend lectures and take exams are almost forgotten now.

How do you balance your professional responsibilities with personal passions such as music and family, and what role do they play in your personal development?



Music has been a part of my life practically my entire life. I have been less active in the last 10 years. Currently, I have a men's quartet that meets every two weeks, primarily at my home in the basement, where we sing Slovenian songs. I also sing in a male sextet called Vox Trot, where I enjoy harmonizing on slightly more challenging melodies.

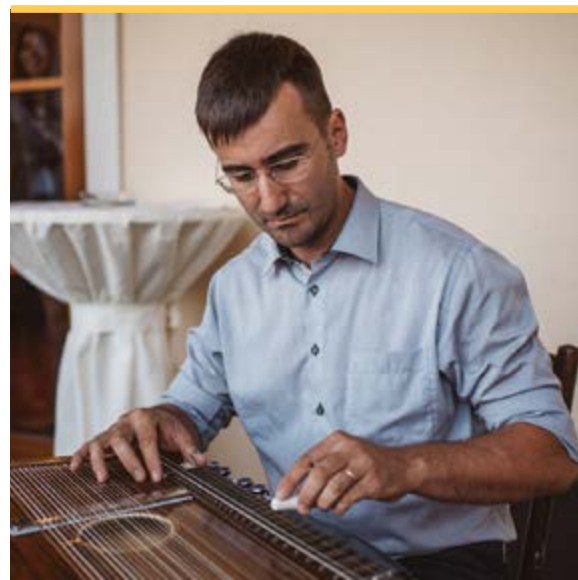
Being a father of four children allows me to practically apply everything we've learned about leading people and even more. I must say that family and a Christian mindset are the key pillars that give my life meaning. All other pillars in my life are subordinate to these, and I believe that this position allows me to be more relaxed at work.

Music indeed plays a special role in your life. Tell us more.

I officially began my musical journey by playing the zither at a music school and later completed my studies in violin. At the Diocesan Classical Gymnasium (Škofijska Klasična Gimnazija) in Ljubljana, I seriously engaged in singing within chamber ensembles and on the other hand I played also bass guitar in punk rock band called Brez talenta and sang back vocals I then sang in

various octets, the vocal group Solalei, and the Vocal Academy of Ljubljana (VAL), where we performed challenging music from the Renaissance onward. During my studies, I partially supported myself by singing in the opera choir of SNG Ljubljana and was very close to a professional singing career. However, after completing my degree in agronomy at the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana, my path shifted towards beekeeping and entrepreneurship.

Music remains a powerful tool for me, as it allows me to express my emotions. I believe that through music, I have learned persistence and precision. I have also been fascinated by the influence of conductors during my time in the opera choir. Some conductors managed to "balance" the choir so that it sounded exceptional, while others did not. Even then, I recognized the crucial role a leader plays in guiding a team.



WHAT ONE CANNOT FIND ON MARKO'S RESUME



EMBA 2023 - 24

Marko Ferenčak
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What's your voice type? **Tenor.**

What kind of music do you listen to for relaxation? **Classical music – operas, chamber music. Rock and pop music – Queen, George Michael.**

Have you ever tried giving a pep talk to your bees before a big honey harvest? What did you tell them and did they listen? **Not really, but I often sing in the beehives together with my brothers.**

Your last vacations destination and what's your preferred way of vacationing? **Family pilgrimage to Rome.**

What advice would you give to your children? In addition to the life instructions that are clearly written in the Bible, I would also emphasize: **»When you work, work with dedication and joy.«**

The last TV series you watched that you would recommend to others. I don't waste time watching television, except with my children, we enjoy watching the comedy series like for example "Kaj dogaja", Mr. Bean, ...