



»THE MOST VALUABLE LEADERSHIP SKILL IS NOT DOMAIN EXPERTISE - IT IS THE ABILITY TO WALK INTO UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY AND MAKE SOUND CALLS BEFORE THE FULL PICTURE ARRIVES.«

MAXIM KORSEKO, GROUP DIRECTOR, META POLAND; EMBA 2008-2009, CZECH REPUBLIC

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*Interviewed by Vera Pasynkova,
photos provided by: Maxim Korseko*

You have extensive experience at multinationals like Philips (until 2020) and now Meta, managing diverse teams across markets. Which specific leadership principle or “soft skill” has been most instrumental in navigating the transition from a traditional giant to a digital-first powerhouse?

When I joined Meta in 2020 after over fifteen years at Philips, I was - to put it mildly -

out of my depth. A completely new commercial language, new metrics, a pace I had never experienced, and I was already responsible for results across multiple markets. What got me through was a principle I had learned at Philips but never tested this hard: make your bets public and measure them in the open. The moment the data disagrees with your call, say so - before anyone has to ask.

It sounds straightforward, but it changes the room. When

people see you are willing to be wrong publicly, they stop giving you the polished update and start giving you the real one.

That experience taught me that the most valuable leadership skill is not domain expertise - it is the ability to walk into unfamiliar territory and make sound calls before the full picture arrives. Today, AI has become the thinking partner I badly wished I had in 2020: it helps me navigate new ground faster, flags where

my reasoning has gaps, and makes it practical to build a development plan I can actually stick to. But the underlying principle stays the same - commit, measure, update. The tools just got remarkably better.

How do you adapt your leadership style to maintain a healthy organizational culture while respecting local operational nuances in the different markets you oversee?

The nuances across Warsaw, Prague, Bucharest, Sofia, and Ljubljana are real - but I have found that one simple discipline travels across all of them. For every plan, I ask the team three things: what are we actually trying to grow, why does that growth deserve priority over everything else we could do, and so what - what specifically becomes possible if the bet works?

The "what" and the "so what" give me a common commercial language across markets. The "why" is where local context lives - and that is where I learn more than I teach.

What has surprised me is how much those three questions, asked publicly week after week, have shaped the culture - more than any offsite or town hall ever could. The team quickly

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learns that vague answers will not get far, but honest ones always get backed.

As a mature manager welcoming new generations into teams and boards - what shifts in working attitudes are you observing, and what key elements of organizational culture keep the "current pot boiling" in the modern workplace?

I will be honest - I have stopped thinking about this as a generational question. There is a much sharper framing that Jack Dorsey and Roelof



Botha at Sequoia articulated recently, and it matches what I see every day.

Most companies are bolting AI onto existing structures as a "copilot" - which makes the hierarchy slightly more efficient without fundamentally changing it. But AI is increasingly able to handle the information-routing that middle management was originally designed for: aggregating context, relaying decisions, keeping people aligned.

So the real split is not

between millennials and Gen Z. It is between people whose value comes from routing information and people whose value comes from judgment under ambiguity - reading context, building trust, sensing what the data has not yet captured. The first group is shrinking. The second is becoming the premium talent every organisation will compete for.

That does not mean middle management vanishes overnight - in compliance-heavy industries the mix shifts rather than disappears

- but the direction is clear. The practical question for any leadership team, or any board, is straightforward: do you know which roles in your organisation are which?

Overseeing CEE for a significant portion of your career, what unique "digital DNA" do you see in CEE companies that gives them a competitive edge in the global export market?

There is a pattern I see across the CEE businesses that go on to compete globally. Three



things tend to be present: the CEO can greenlight a new experiment without routing it through four committees, the distance between the people who see the customer and the people who set strategy is very short, and the team is comfortable operating in English from day one.

Where all three are present, I find companies that punch well above their weight - because our structural constraints, small home markets and limited capital, have quietly forced the best CEE businesses to become export-native long before anyone told them to.

I genuinely believe this is one of the most under-priced assets in European business today. If I were advising a board on a CEE market entry, the first thing I would want to understand is whether those three signals are present - before looking at a single financial statement.

What is the single biggest barrier preventing CEE SMEs from becoming global household names, and how is digital infrastructure solving it?

Capital is tight, talent is scarce, and the AI Act adds real compliance cost - I do not dismiss any of that. But the biggest barrier I see in practice is something less tangible: the belief that you need to be "ready" before you act.

I work with a CEE brand that was in a low double-digit decline year-on-year when we started together. Instead of waiting for conditions to improve, they decided to move - tapped into every growth window we could find, used AI to compress their creative cycle from weeks to days, and treated every campaign as a live experiment rather than a finished plan. Within a year they were growing over fifty per cent year-on-year - an outstanding result in a category where most players would be

happy with flat.

The barrier was never budget or regulation. It was the willingness to act before feeling ready. And digital infrastructure is what makes acting early survivable because the cost of a wrong bet has genuinely never been lower.

Meta has undergone significant structural and "cultural resets" in recent years - how do you keep a high-performing regional team motivated and focused during periods of intense global corporate change?

I have worked through two major organisational cycles - one at Philips, one at Meta - and the most useful thing I have learned is that the change itself is almost never what breaks people. The hard part is the eighteen months before the change, when the people closest to the customer can already feel what is not working but the system is not yet ready to hear it.

My job during every reset has been the same: shorten that lag. Give the operators who signal early the cover to act, and reward the people who are right over the people who are loud.

What I have found is that motivation follows naturally



from that. Once people believe the game rewards being right and being early, they stop dreading the resets and start looking for the next signal.

You're a frequent voice at forums and conferences - why is it personally important for you to champion the "democratization of advertising" for small businesses rather than focusing only on top-tier enterprise clients?

Long before I knew the word "business," I was a kid with a head full of maps, convinced the most interesting life was one spent crossing borders and getting things done in places I had never been. Over time that ambition rewired into something I think is more useful: I care less about being the person who crosses borders, and more about helping companies in this region do it themselves.

That is what the democratization of advertising really means to me. It is the difference between a small Polish or Slovenian brand needing an entire marketing

department to compete internationally and the same brand standing side by side with the largest multinationals from day one - same tools, same reach, same shot at the customer. That asymmetry is the single most important commercial story CEE has right now, and I do not think enough people appreciate how radically it has changed the odds.

You've been one of the voices popularizing the concept of the "fifth quarter" (Q5) in e-commerce. How do you use your platform to shift traditional retailers toward these unconventional growth windows - and, to be provocative, is Q5 a real market phenomenon or a clever way for platforms to fix the post-festive spending "dip"?

Fair question - I will take it head-on. Q5 is both a real consumer phenomenon and, yes, partly a rhythm that platforms like ours help shape. People genuinely do shop differently in the weeks after the festive peak, and those windows would be narrower if

we did not put media weight and creative formats behind them. Both readings are true, and pretending otherwise would be dishonest.

What makes Q5 genuinely interesting for CEE retailers is not whether it is "organic" or "engineered" - it is that customer acquisition costs drop sharply in that window, and the brands that plan for it quietly take share from the brands that do not. That is not marketing theory. That is what we see in the data, year after year.

In your field, AI is now automating everything from ad creative to media buying. Do you believe AI will eventually replace the need for traditional marketing departments, or simply change the "hiring profile" for future leaders?

AI will not replace marketing departments, but it is fundamentally changing what they cost and what they can produce. A team of five today can genuinely deliver what required fifteen people three years ago — not because they are superhuman, but because generative AI has collapsed the distance between having an idea and having something you can actually ship.

What AI still cannot do is decide which of those outputs is worth shipping - that judgment call is the most valuable thing a human brings to the room, and I do not see it being automated any time soon. The question for any organisation is no longer "how many people do we need"



but “what mix of judgment and automation produces the best return on the next million we spend?”

Regarding your expertise in export, how do you see Generative AI specifically changing the way a small business from Poland or Slovenia researches and enters a foreign market like the US or Southeast Asia in the next 24 months?

Let me give you a real example. We are working closely with a CEE household-goods brand that is considering the US as their next market. Twelve months ago, entering a new market meant hiring a local agency, commissioning translated creative, and waiting six to eight weeks to find out whether anything resonated. Today, the same brand can use generative AI to synthesise US category research in an afternoon, produce localised creative variations before lunch, and have the first paid tests running that same week - compressing a two-month learning loop into about ten days.

In the next twenty-four months, the gap between CEE SMEs that enter global markets and those that stay home will not be marketing budget. It will be how tightly they close that loop between hypothesis and result.

What is your personal view on the increasing use of AI? Is it “multiplying and hiding” human potential, or is it like any other tool that depends entirely on the proficiency of the user?

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This is a field where the frontier moves in weeks, and if you are not rolling up your sleeves and experimenting with every new release yourself, you cannot credibly advise anyone on what AI can actually do for their business. That is why I treat my own work as a live experiment - and I share the results openly, including the uncomfortable ones.

When I tested AI workflows across my team, eighty per cent of participants got zero measurable value on their first attempt. I published that, because honest failure data is worth more than a highlight reel. Last week I wrote about the gap between running thirty AI experiments a year and running thirty-six thousand with the same tools. This week I am running a loop where two AI agents critique each other’s output until the quality clears a bar I have set.

AI is not “hiding” human potential - it is ruthlessly revealing who is willing to learn in public and who is waiting for someone else to go first.

Looking back at your Executive MBA at Bled (2008–2009), what were your biggest takeaways? What impact did that time have on your career, and do

you still keep in touch with your classmates?

The biggest takeaway from Bled was not a framework or a model - it was the realisation that business is a craft you learn best in the company of people who will stay in your life for the next twenty years.

Ivica Vlastelica was the person who first pushed me to apply to IEDC, and Natko Bilić was the classmate I spent more late study nights with than anyone else - with both we are still in touch. On the faculty side, Jim Ellert is the reason I still believe finance is the one language every serious executive eventually has to speak. And Nadya Zhexembayeva, then the Coca-Cola Chaired Professor of Sustainable Development, is the reason I still ask whether what I am building will matter in ten years and potentially outlasts me.

Twenty years on, I still measure every new professional relationship against the standard those ones set. That is not a small thing for a school to give you.

WHAT ONE CANNOT FIND ON MAXIM'S RESUME



EMBA 2008-2009

Maxim Korseko
Czech Republic

Group Director,
Meta

How many countries have you actually lived and worked in so far?

Five, counting only the ones where I worked for longer than few years: Belarus, the Netherlands, Russia, Poland, and now the Czech Republic, where my family is based today.

Growing up in Belarus, how did you spend your school summer holidays?

In my earlier years I would spend holidays in the village at grandma's, while from middle school we would go with my parents to Palanga in Lithuania on the Baltic coast. That place still has a special place in my heart.

Absolute favourite childhood food?

Draniki with sour cream, without a question.

Latest TV series or film you watched and would recommend, and why?

Shrinking on Apple TV. A therapist who decides to stop following the script and tell his patients the truth - which is messy and risky and occasionally brilliant. And the people around him: open, empathetic, vulnerable, living their lives with their eyes wide open.

What advice would you give your younger self, and the main piece of advice you give your children today?

The same line for both: learn to act before you are ready. Ready is not a state - it is a decision. I apply it now every time I open a new AI tool I do not yet understand, and I hope my children learn this earlier than I did.

When was the last time you went to a concert, and who was performing?

Thomas Adès conducting the Czech Philharmonic at the Rudolfinum in Prague, December 2025. A programme built around the Boulez centenary, including the Czech premiere of Adès's Exterminating Angel Symphony - the kind of evening that reminds you how much world-class talent lives in this part of Europe. My wife and I try to go whenever the programme pulls us in, and this one was impossible to pass up.

One thing your kids can do (technically or otherwise) that you simply cannot?

Three of my four children code - my son, who is now an industrial engineer, and both of my daughters, aged ten and thirteen, who have rather lost patience waiting for their father to catch up. I am the one trying to close the gap on vibe coding in the evenings, while they already ship.

Next country on your list to visit that you've never been to?

At Meta we have a privilege called »recharge« - an additional thirty days of holidays after five years of work. My wife and I had always dreamt of a big trip together: she had never been to the ASEAN region and I had only ever been on business. In March we visited Malaysia and Japan, then crossed to New Zealand and Australia - four very different countries and cultures that gave us lifetime experiences. Peru is next on the list - a country neither of us has seen.