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Rade Injac, Head Launches LatAm, Sandoz International Miami LatAm Office, IEDC MBA 2016-17

»YOU NEVER KNOW WHO AND HOW, IN THE MOST DIFFICULT MOMENT, WILL SHOW UP AND GIVE YOU A HAND AND WILL PUSH YOU FORWARD.»

We met with Rade Injac in November, when he came to IEDC to address the new generation of General Management Program graduates joining the alumni community. Rade is a GMP graduate himself, however, he has completed an Executive MBA program a few years later too. His story could be described shortly by “When there is a will, there is a way”. Originally from a reasonably small town in Serbia, Rade has lived in three countries until now and is currently residing in Miami, USA, working for a multinational pharmaceutical giant Novartis. Rade was born in Serbia to a working class parents. He did his primary and high school there, as well as completed undergraduate studies at the university. He was eighteen when he left home first time to go to study pharmacy in Belgrade. In 2004, though, he left Serbia and was about to start his interesting journey. In upcoming years he has done his share of travel, both for work and privately, that he says every time changes him into a better person. His career development definitely moulded him into a strong determined person he is today. The next day after we had an interview, Rade was turning 40. He seemed content and happy with his journey so far. So let us share some of the things that we managed to talk about in the short time that we had.



Interviewed by Vera Pasyukova

Looking at your career path so far, would you say that most of the things that happened, were part of a strictly developed plan or some things were unexpected?

In the beginning of my career I did not have any plans to become a boss one day, in fact, I could see myself as a researcher in a lab. I never thought about being a manager. Maybe being a team leader in a lab, working in a group of young researchers. In the beginning, I was focused on a scientific work and scientific awards were the goal. I did not even think, dream or imagine a career that I have today. It was not possible to predict what was

about to happen.

Was chemistry an interest of all your life?

Chemistry became my first scientific love when I was around 13 years old. I had a very strict professor who was not very popular in the school, but I really liked the way she delivered the content. I liked the magic of chemistry: you put a few things together and you get something new, or you put a few things together and you get a colour in the lab or some smoke, or whatever. The power of that energy, combining things and making “miracles”, was driving me towards pharmaceutical

science.

Going to high school in those times in Serbia was difficult from financial point of view, unfortunately. There was a crisis and a war in the region. My parents told me that even though I was the best in class, it was pretty clear that due to financial political situations and the fact that I’m coming from a working class family, it will be difficult to continue my studies, and most probably I will have to work instead of going to the university. Nevertheless, a specialized school was something that my parents were driving me towards, to help me decide which direction to take, however, they did not

want to influence my choice. So I did the screening of the school programs available and realised that the best school that had a lot of chemistry in the curriculum, was a medical school, a medical high school in Zrenjanin. I applied for it, passed the exam. Despite high competition, I was accepted and landed in a class with 31 females. Next four years I spent studying with 31 girls. Few weeks after we started the program, I was voted the president of the class.

When Rade describes his experience in the medical school, he mentions that while in the beginning he thought he would have an influence over his class, he was completely wrong. In fact, his presidency role turned out to be a spokesperson position. He also learnt that gender misbalance can be very difficult for teamwork. Comparing his experience in working later in purely male driven group, he said that that was another extreme that can impede any kind of breakthrough for any ideas.

How come you decided to move from Serbia to Slovenia?

That was also a very interesting story. I did my diploma thesis with an international mentorship. So in 2002 I had one pharmaceutical summer camp here in Slovenia, in Radenci. It was the first time that I came to Slovenia for a week. During that week I visited the faculty of pharmacy in Ljubljana. They had one piece of equipment that I was interested in, which was new in analytical science, but nobody else in ex-Yugoslavia had that. So I had a talk with a professor who was working with it and I asked him if there is a possibility that I could do a diploma here. He said: »Yes, we can arrange that if you want. You can have dual

mentorship with your professor in Belgrade and me here, and you do your final exam in Belgrade«. Of course, that was easy to say than do, because at the end of the day I had to find financing of the whole idea. On the other hand, the university of Belgrade at that time, in 2002, did not have any bilateral or international collaboration with any university. It was only two years since democracy came to the country. The country was isolated because of the sanctions imposed during the 1990s. So when I came to the faculty of pharmacy in Belgrade saying that I want to do that international diploma thesis, they told me that I cannot, it will not be recognized as there is no agreement between the two universities. What I did was writing letters to everybody, including the top of the university to ask for the

you are extremely good being one of the top five students, however, with your energy, with your way of doing things and your aggressiveness we cannot give you the position in the faculty, because at the end of the day you are going to kill the harmony of the team«.

Rade continues that the turning point was what happened a few minutes later, when a personal assistant of the dean ran into the office and started crying and screaming that the prime minister Zoran Đinđić was killed in the city center of Belgrade. While the dean rushed out of the office hearing the news, Rade was looking out of the window of his office. The view on the whole Belgrade and Danube and Sava river opened,



possibility to arrange that. Finally, thanks to my request, they signed an international collaboration agreement. It was signed during the last days of November 2002 and two days later I was travelling already to Slovenia. I finished my diploma on March 7, 2003 and then on March 12, 2003 I had to have a talk with a dean in Belgrade about a promised position in a faculty for me. What I was told then was: »You did this international thesis and you were very aggressive in that, in fact,

thinking that probably there is no place for him in this country that is rolling into a wrong direction. He decided to leave the country and arranged his PhD studies in Slovenia. There were a number of obstacles that he had to overcome, from ridiculous bureaucratic procedures connected to visa procedure, catch 22 like, to providing evidence of enough finance to sustain himself during his studies. Not to mentioned the language that

he is now very good at and the first two years of life in Slovenia, combining on studies and serving tables to survive.

He recalls that he was about to give up and sink into despair a few times before he was able to go to Slovenia. One particular situation, when stuck, trying to find additional funds necessary to be shown to Slovenian authorities, made him learn that you never know who and how, in the most difficult moment, will show up and give you a hand and will push you forward. In January 2004 Rade went to collect his diploma and in the lobby of the faculty met a director of the medical agency of Serbia. Both him and Rade were members of the university parliament, but they never really had much interaction in the past apart from parliament meetings. He noticed Rade's being upset and invited him to his office to explain what was wrong. There was a whole board of directors sitting in his office that time, celebrating something over a bottle of whiskey. When asked to tell what was bothering him at last, Rade confessed that there is a gap of 1615 EUR at his account that separates him from his future, attending an international PhD program in Slovenia. What happened next was that the director - as Rade describes him, a man in his 50s, very artistic, having a pretty strange style, neither strict or elegant, but sort of artistic - looked at the financial director who was also a very tall guy, a basketball player, and just signed to him something with his eyes. The financial director nodded and left the room and returned 10 minutes later with three pieces of paper, three copies, which stated that the medical agency is giving a one-time scholarship to Rade Injac in the value of 1615 EUR for

his international PhD program in Slovenia. The only obligation that he had was to finish his PhD within the deadline that he is putting for himself. So, he moved to Slovenia. Three years later when he went to Lek for a postgraduate scholarship interview, he got instead a job position as a researcher, doing exactly what he was dreaming of. A year later during his conversation with the HR, he was suggested to move into a project manager position and take advantage of his managerial skills that Rade did not realize at the time that he had. It was at the end of 2008 that he became a project manager and shortly after got his PhD and shortly after also became the first foreigner from ex-Yugoslavian countries to become an official professor at the University of Ljubljana, at the same time working for Lek. Then in 2012 he got an offer that, Rade says, was pushed on him in the form "you have to take it or you have to leave". After some negotiations he was off to Eastern Germany site with 200 people, four hours away from Munich, on a two-year assignment to deliver company targets and in the meantime to figure out the way to change completely the prevailing culture that was impeding the processes.

I got a task to change completely the culture, deliver the targets, influence the team in different ways, and implement the processes. So I had to go even against managers, even against my manager in a local position. So it took me a lot of energy, I had a feeling that I'm giving a lot, but not getting anything back. Suddenly, after 6 months of trying different kind of leadership models, I reached the point when I found one way that would fit into an Eastern German culture, which is very similar, by the way, to the Serbian culture because of the former communism social block past.

Can you give an example of a behavior that you are talking about?

There is a very collective behavior of the group, that can be described like this: "who is responsible: all", "when it will be done: as soon as possible". What does it mean in fact is when we will have time. For me, being a project manager, such attitude of not having a date nor name, the basic two things - was absolutely not acceptable. First of all, I had to break the ice, I had to make people feel successful, to deliver certain things. On one hand, I had to do some micromanagement with some people, to guide them how to change their own



behaviours, on the other hand, with some other people, I had to manage their feeling of potential punishment because of failure. So this collective behavior «We are all responsible» was driven by the »if we fail, we all fail« which does not have to be like that. My attitude was the opposite. If someone is going to fail, we all are going to learn and not that we are all going to fail together. So driving them from the collective failure behavior to the collective learning behavior was quite a difficult journey. However, we managed to deliver all the targets that I've got in 14 months instead of 2 years, and after 14 months they (*management) asked me to stay there for additional 5 years and I remember saying "No, this was the deal we agreed on. Now you have to find me a better, different position. So I managed what I promised, it's time to get a reward."

Rade went to Eastern Germany immediately after finishing a General Management Program at IEDC. Novartis supports education and personal development. That year the company wanted him to go get a bigger picture and not just focus on narrow specialized topics.

Did GMP program help you in any way?

Yes, it did. Especially the second module. I don't know how it is organized now, but the second part of the program was more focused on soft skills development and that helped me in the environment I was working in the Eastern of Germany, which has completely different culture from the one in Slovenia. You know, in Slovenia people did not always feel so safe, but they had to be ambitious, and they had to fight, to speak up, they are pushing, they are team-driven. Of course, there are people different than

that, but generally the culture is different.

Talking about travelling and living in other countries, would you say your identity changed? How much did it define you?

That was one of the topics that I touched in one of the (blog) stories. In 2002 was the first time I went to Western Europe, I was 24 years old at that time. For me, going out of the country, seeing different cultures, different colours, different sexual orientations, different religions was a big shock and I was judging a lot. I was judging each and every one passing by, evaluating people. Nowadays, I feel like a global citizen, I'm not judging anyone on the street anymore for doing (whatever they are doing),

do it, however, complement it with food, so Balkan "meze" goes with any drinking, here in Slovenia it was just straight plain drinking.

Overall, he really liked Slovenia that has a Balkan spirit, but rules of the West, sort of a perfect fit in-between.

Slovenians do know how to enjoy life, but on the other hand, they are strict when they have to be strict. This is a perfect fit. In Germany for me it was very difficult, I did not have German friends when I was living there. Luckily in headquarters half of the people are international, so I had a chance to spend my private time with a lot of other people from other countries. I know I was sometimes teasing my German colleagues: "Can you relax and



wearing, being whatever they are. The world is a big space and there are a lot of options for everyone: everybody can be whatever they want to be.

However, Rade remembers that when he moved to Slovenia there were no big cultural shocks for him but one that was concerning youth habits regarding alcohol here. In fact, he says he was shocked by the amount young people drank and while in Serbia people also

enjoy a bit? We are not in the office anymore and it's a beer time, it's a pizza time – we can talk about other things, about the project we will talk tomorrow in the office. " Now, for example, in Miami, with my colleagues most of them latinos, we could have a fight, but 5 minutes later there is always a smile, we are going to have a completely different discussion, we are going to enjoy life out of the office. Again, if I put things into perspective, Slovenia is a perfect country with

a great balance between joy and seriousness.

Talking about culture, but the business aspect of it, would you say multinationals corporate culture supports diversity?

It's a tricky question. If I look at what are the targets of the company, at least where I am working, they want to have high diversity level, with very inclusive culture. We have in the company a diversity and inclusion group that is working on taking care of all activities that are going on for everyone to feel welcome, that in turn provides people with space for motivation, it's easier to get the best out of each and every person. However, I must say each of us – now I'm talking about my opinion, not a company statement – each of us, who are selecting people for the team, we have a tendency to select certain type of people, because we know what we need, which people we would like to work with.

What I was doing as a manager, whenever I had an option and whenever a team was not formed immediately from the start, I was giving an opportunity to the department heads to choose one person who is going to work with me, just because they are going to give me diversity which will not be connected, and I will have to manage it in my own way. The only things that I like to have is balance between genders, but other than that, I learnt throughout my experience and it's also proven that the more diverse is the team, the better outcome is. When there is a problem and two people are fighting in a team, I enjoy observing and getting ideas, because those people are not even aware how much comes out of it. I hate it when I have a team, there is a problem and everybody is quiet, it means something is wrong.

A question (or two) to wrap-up our interview, besides work, what keeps you motivated, where do you get energy? Are you a crazy sportsman running marathons, perhaps? Did a 40-years-old crisis hit you yet?

When I was a kid, I had a bronchitis, a chronic one. When I was seven years old, the doctor said to my parents: "He is going to have an asthma in a few years. You can put him in the swimming class to see if his lungs can develop more and that would bring up the capacity". And they did it. I had to go every day to the swimming class, then it became the regular thing and I became one of the team members for the competitions. Swimming is my passion. I'm still doing that. I did

competitions during my university time, I did competitions a few years ago here in Slovenia with one team from Tivoli. Now, that I'm in Florida, I started with a triathlons. Now I'm doing biking and swimming, jogging occasionally, so as much as I need to be prepared for the competition. In 2008 I had two heart attacks and that completely changed my lifestyle. I have to be careful how much I'm pushing myself. So swimming, biking, jogging and gym – these things are making me feel good, I do that in my free time. I like travelling a lot. I'm reading, I like to read a real book, I don't like electronic things. From time to time I like to go to a good concert and theatre, to some parties and so on.

MEET RADE IN EVERYDAY LIFE

My friends would describe me as demanding.

The last book I read was »Origin« by Dan Brown.

My leadership motto is »Small celebration, big motivation«.

The advice I would give to my younger self: »Take it easy!«