

insight

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Corporate Social Responsibility in Practice



In a series of 10 interviews with Business Leaders in the Czech Republic, Mark Hamill (pictured), Global Managing Director for SpenglerFox, an Irish Executive Search organization and external partner with UNICEF across the CEE markets discusses social, professional and corporate social responsibility challenges facing business leaders in these demanding times.

Christos Gallis is GM of Johnson & Johnson Czech & Slovak Republic. While discussing the virtues of Prague, Christos admires its human dimensions, its lack of traffic (when compared to Athens, its all relative!), the choice between opera, movies, theatre etc he finds very liberating. Increasingly on weekends Christos can be found with his family walking around the magnificent Prague Zoo in Troja.

Christos explains that Athens with a population of 4.5million inhabitants is like many cities pulled together and it is increasingly difficult to get from one side of the city to the other, a friend who lives in the north of the city if you live in the south, will be difficult to see too often!

When Christos has guests in town he enjoys dining with them in Kogo Sovansky Dum, and always when his father comes to visit they visit the Opera and enjoy walking home afterwards.

Regarding the Czech language, Christos finds it very difficult; although he has a strong understanding he tries to avoid having Czech conversations. Christos' wife, who speaks 6 languages found it painful to learn, and it reminded me of my own experiences when I came to Prague initially in 1997. Having spoken fluent Spanish, decent French and knowing 5 words of Portuguese, I asked myself how difficult can Czech be...10 years later I nod knowingly when Czech conversations are around me, but inside wish I had been whisked away to the mountains for 2 months with no English speakers in a 100 km radius and was forced to learn the language out of necessity!

Christos tells the story of within his first month of arriving here, he was given the phone number of a man who had a tennis court, when he called he realized the man spoke no English, Christos who was terribly looking forward to a game of tennis, realized his Czech language shortcomings when trying to confirm the time of the game...the only number he remembered being 'sedm'...thus the game was set for 7pm. From then he made sure he learnt the numbers.

He has used this story and recounted to his teams over the years, for fun his Slovak team bought him a Slovak Ice hockey jersey with...the number 7 on the back. In Greek 'ne' means 'yes' which caused endless fun in Christos initial time in Prague, and certainly anyone who walked by his office in the early days thought him a very negative person always saying 'no' to everything!

Christos has noticed a very positive change in terms of peoples motivation to work, and has seen first time employees attitudes change from being very 'benefits' focused initially to now realizing that at first they must prove themselves and then benefits and investment follows. He sees a healthily ambitious generation coming through. Regarding the current climate and challenging times he sees one positive aspect of the economic downturn that hard work will be needed and rewarded, while those who take advantage of opportunity will suffer.

Globally the markets are suffering explains Christos, although they are not feeling the impact yet in the Czech or Slovak markets, there is as he explains only a mild softening of demand. In general Christos and I agreed that the media in general is precipitating the downturn and this is leading companies to restructure and cut costs.

Christos is however slightly pessimistic and doesn't think that we have hit the bottom yet, although he believes the market here to be more insulated, bigger markets for J&J are currently restructuring. When asked what advice he would pass on to first time managers currently trying to steer their business through this challenging period, Christos explains that a good manager needs to be able to read the situation, understand what is going on and most of all to show respect to their team. Christos advocates managing for the long term, using 'principled leadership', knowing that you cannot take advantage of, or fool your team, and also show respect for the individual. He strongly suggests open and transparent dialogue, with 'transparency' of decisions, thoughts, and discussions being the key value.

Leadership positions, as Christos explains, don't mean much as you can lose your job also, therefore in leadership roles it's highly important to be humble and to treat people as you would expect to be treated.

Our own conversation drifted towards politics and Christos' comment, which resonated with me, was that in general people don't show high levels of respect for politics, and until capable and passionate people can be attracted to enter politics, the same level of 'disinterest' will continue.

Towards the end of our discussion I asked Christos about his work/life balance, and how he manages his 'blackberry'. He explained that while not addicted to his blackberry, he does use it, and unfortunately does find it impossible to ignore! When he arrives into the office each morning, he doesn't immediately switch on his laptop but forces himself to think about what he needs to achieve that day, knowing that once he switches his machines on he won't be able to resist answering his emails.

Christos has a simple rule for traveling which means weekends are sacred for his family, and he never leaves on a Sunday. He will not compromise on this; it's a constant battle he feels with sense of guilt on both family and work sides.

When he was younger he would have liked to write and to teach, and even once dreamed of entering politics. Christos had a glorious track and field athletic career and was in the Greek national team specializing in the 110m hurdles, only to just miss out on the LA Olympics in 1984.

Regarding Corporate Social Responsibility, Christos links it to Johnson & Johnsons famous Credo and explains that J&J is one of the top investors in CSR activity in Czech Republic, and was elected Top Philanthropist in 2008 according to a PWC report, donating up to 30% of gross profit to supporting its charities. This was the 5th year in a row that the report has been created and the second time J&J has topped the list. J&J have a local committee made up of staff from across its business units, who are tasked to pick projects and develop them; there is a link up from the committee leader to a global J&J employee who manages J&J's global philanthropy projects. On average locally J&J get involved in 10-15 projects annually in the Czech Rep. NGOs are invited to come and contact this group regarding getting J&J involved in their projects. Christos is open to getting UNICEF involved, and was a UNICEF volunteer for 6 months back in his student days.

Christos sees J&J's involvement in CSR playing more and more of a role in young people's decision on where to work as they are increasingly interested in knowing the company's policy on animal testing, environment protection and a variety of other key issues. As our very pleasant conversation draws to a close Christos quotes from Kipling's famous IF poem "If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same..."