

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEFAN FRITSCH, OWNER OF ELEVENPARK

Stefan Fritsch, owner of Elevenpark, the biggest indoor playground in Hungary, talks about important leadership qualities in company management and his experiences in Hungary (from the June 2010 issue of Manager Magazine).



Fun, fun, fun – this would be the best way to summarise Stefan Fritsch’s, the managing director of W.E.T Automotive Systems Hungary Ltd., hobby. The top manager created an indoor playground called Elevenpark, where he spends most of his free-time.

How did you come across this particular hobby?

We are from Munich where playgrounds like Elevenpark already exist. My children regularly visit Budapest during the school holidays. One day they asked me why there isn’t such a park in Budapest. So I can thank my children for this idea.

Why did you choose this particular hobby?

I love children and it makes me happy to see how much they enjoy playing in the park, since there is a child in every adult. It feels great to jump around on the bungee trampoline, fire away in the soft shooter or win an air hockey game after a hard day at the office.

Did anyone else “catch on”?

My wife did. She manages the business and puts all her heart into the park day after day.

What sort of abilities does this hobby require?

You need to be keen on playing with children and working with people. However, I think there are numerous other things to success, like working hard, being a good organiser, devising a good negotiation strategy, creativity, coming up with ideas, flexibility and the ability to develop continuously.

Do you have any abilities that came to the surface because of your hobby?

I learned how to establish a company adapted to this concept, find business partners, establish co-operation, plough through complicated contracts, make these more advantageous for us, devise concepts for our equipment, obtain permits and various authorisation and a great deal more. “Selling a product” was something completely new to me, whilst acquiring business skills and dealing with partners and employees in a performance-oriented way was a challenge for my wife.

What kind of attributes should a company manager have in your view?

A company executive needs to be a role model, who personally experiences their very own expectations; creates order, rules and responsibility; demands discipline; acts consistently and, moreover, is capable of dealing with people. An executive needs to support continuous progress and also expect this from employees. An executive always issues instructions that benefit the client and must always be reliable and represent a firm basis for every employee.

Do Hungarian managers have these qualities?

I think we need to begin by pointing out that every manager needs to be assessed individually. There is no such thing as "the Hungarian manager". I know many Hungarian executives with such attributes, which, as far as I have experienced, generally causes problems for them, i.e., in getting their Western European colleagues to accept their opinion. This is because they are too polite and lack self-confidence, or because they try to avoid all forms of conflict, since arguing is not customary in Hungary. In addition, they find it difficult to abide by the rules and maintain order in the long run. In my view, this is exactly what forms the basis of ongoing development. This is not simply up to the individual, but rather depends on the society that surrounds them and in which they grow up. In this society, rules are only important up to the point where individual freedom and creativity is not inhibited. On the grounds of my observations, in Hungary mostly female managers are capable of successfully managing human relations, are explicitly high-achievers and very hard workers.

What do you think is missing in the Hungarian business world?

I often experience that representatives of Hungarian companies are not competent in making decisions, or make offers that are not competitive with Western ones. I often receive 30-40% better offers from Germany. I think that the problem here is that Hungarians simply lack experience in realistically assessing the market. They often seem to lack the intent to co-operate, as well as openness. However, I am satisfied in overall terms.

Do you have a business role model?

My role models are people who follow visions and explicit objectives; people who make decisions expediently and who in the meantime not only think of making money fast; people who have managed to create useful and long-lasting things for society and are innovative and open to new trends; people who put the client first, do not turn their nose up and are not arrogant, but are natural at all times.

What do you like in Hungarian business life?

The infinite opportunities and huge potentials. I also like the "let's shake on it" kind of mentality. If someone manages to find the right partner, they can rely on their word. I like the room for movement authorities ensure. Authorisation procedures and bureaucracy are much more complicated in Germany.

What would you change if you could?

It is always possible to do everything better everywhere. Just think about what the world was like 100 years ago. The main thing is for something to change for the benefit and future of the country. Benchmarking is taking place in the industry; it is only natural to compare yourself to the best. I think it is important to understand what needs to be changed to keep up with the best. Long-term thinking is also important. Our actions should never be guided by the illusionary proximity of fast success.

Are you happy with the business results you achieved?

I am very satisfied. Our achievements relied on tight planning and organisation, continuous pressuring, a great deal of work and diligence, professional and reliable partners, the strenuous work put in by my wife, as well as support from the family, friends and business partners.

What else do you wish to achieve?

I would like to play a key social role and take part in developing the motional abilities of children. This is what I am working on with a good deal of creativity.

How does it feel like to be a business person in Hungarian society?

Thanks to my Hungarian and foreign business partners, as well as my Hungarian wife I feel happy living in this country. Everything I am working on at the moment would not be possible all alone. Just one more obstacle to overcome: the language, which unfortunately still represents a precondition for conducting negotiations. Sometimes I am unhappy with the way things are going and expect far too much from people. I need to learn to be more patient, refrain from always emphasising my own point of view and accept things the way they are if I can't change them. The country has developed immensely over the past 20 years; Hungarians have managed to achieve a great deal during this period through the hard work they put in, as well as national and international support.

How do you feel as a private person in Hungarian society?

I feel great here thanks to my Hungarian wife, who "took me in" with great love and kindness. People, particularly in the countryside, are very kind. The country is beautiful; the Pilis region is a wonderful area and excellent place for hiking and cycling and Budapest is simply a charming city.

What reforms do you find important?

I am aware that most products and services are 30-40% cheaper in Western countries and that German employees take home 10-30% higher net salaries from their gross wages in relation to Hungarians. Seeing they ask me several times whether I would like an invoice, it seems evident to me that tax is not paid on a high number of transactions. Whilst on my end, having paid and still paying for everything against an invoice even during the construction process, I have not been refunded any VAT for months. This is why I come to ask: what would happen if the state were to receive taxes due, charge lower taxes for employees and companies, break the shadow economy cycle and liberate the country from the pressure of the crisis. I feel that developments taking place over the past few months represent an opportunity for the country, which I hope it will manage to seize.

If you had the opportunity to do so, would you manage to achieve these?

I think that changing a country's mentality is a huge task. This is by no means a one-man job that can be done overnight, in a couple of years. Everyone needs to take part and chip in. Change is always painful and in most cases its benefits can only be perceived in the long run. Moreover, trust is also needed to proceed along a path with no end in sight and without knowing where it leads to. I admire the courage of the new Prime Minister and wish him and the Hungarian nation much energy, perseverance and courage for this huge task. I am sure Hungary is capable of surmounting obstacles, if the country realises this cannot simply be achieved in a day or within a few weeks and is open to adapting the best solutions.