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Leading in positive

Carles Alemán

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“The leader of the future will be a people coordinator and motivator”



Carles Alemán | CEO of Iberpotash

Continuous learning, open communication and integration of younger generations' skills are some of the keys to leadership broached by Carles Alemán, CEO of Iberpotash, in this interview. Ethics, principles and a culture of cooperation are part of the past, present and, above all, the future of organisations.

Could you please describe the professional growth that led you to become a consolidated leader in your industry?

I don't consider myself to be a consolidated leader. I think that it has been more of a constant progression. Ever since I was little I wanted to study quantum chemistry. I was clear on that at the age of 12. So after studying quantum chemistry, the last thing that I expected was to get to where I am and pursue the career that I did.

My main goal back then was to design medicines on a computer and, above all, research. My training was very technical, but I had no business knowledge. I consider this to be a defect in the current education system. I believe that all technical degree courses should include a finance and a marketing subject.

When I started working, what I and those around me least expected was that I was going to be acting as a salesperson, so, in other words, I had to sell. It turned that I, initially quite a reserved person, felt comfortable. I liked it and I didn't find it very difficult. After that, I realised that I needed more tools, and I decided to study at ESADE business school, where I focused on

everything relating to finance, marketing and human resources. This equipped me with new skills and knowledge that I didn't have previously.

How did you progress?

I have been progressing in the day to day. It's really quite simple. I have tried to do things to the best of my ability and they have just flowed naturally. There was no plan in the sense of: «to get to this point I have to do this». My approach was: «to do what I'm doing, I need the following, I do it, I try to do it as best as I can. And if it turns out well, great». As far as everything else is concerned, I believe that I was lucky to get to where I am. I could have fallen by the wayside or decided to do something different.

“If you decide to study something, don't do it because you want to get somewhere. Do it for the pleasure of learning. The rest will follow”.

“Young people today are more committed than ever; when there is an issue that interests them, like climate change, they take to the streets and nothing will keep them quiet”.

What qualities have you had to develop in order to lead teams?

I remember when I presented my thesis years ago, my classmates told me: «you know a lot about this because it's your thing». Yes, but you have to be able to make others understand it.

The key lies in how you put it across. Communication has to be unhurried and geared towards the person that you're speaking to. Also, as regards leading human teams, I've obviously evolved, but society has evolved too. Companies are much more participative nowadays. When I started out, I was much more open than my managers. I had already taken on board the fact that structures had to be more participative. It's the way I am. What's more, I wish they were even more participative than they are now. But some of us have some skills, others have different ones, and it's essential for everyone to play a role within the company.

In your view, how can we innovate in the field of leadership and talent management?

First of all, you have to be humble, aware that we don't know everything and mistakes can be made. Then, you have to be able to listen, and if you have to admit that the other person's right, do it. It's also important to have a clear objective and to go after it. Don't beat around the bush. Instead, have a clear idea of where you want to go and use all the resources and the team available to you to achieve it.

We spoke before about how the team leadership function has changed. How has this leader figure evolved since the beginning of your professional career?

When I started out on my career, it was very hierarchical. It had two fundamental features: it was hierarchical and the information didn't flow. In other words, one person kept the information locked away in a drawer and it didn't come out of there. As we have said, it is very different now. Companies are much more participative, everyone has to give an opinion and information doesn't belong to any one person. It belongs to the company. Of course, there will always be different levels of confidentiality, but within those levels the information has to circulate.

Is there a leader you especially admire?

There is no specific person that I admire as a leader. What I do admire are certain aspects of many different people. I have been extremely fortunate to work with highly skilled professionals, both people in higher positions and colleagues or team members, and what I have always tried to do is learn from all of them. But I don't have a specific leader in mind that I want to emulate.

What message would you give to a young person who is starting out on his/her professional career? What would your advice to him/her be?

Be yourself, don't think about twenty years' time, think about doing your best at that particular moment. If you study something, don't think about doing it because you want to get somewhere, do it to learn. If you apply yourself, things will happen by themselves.

Nowadays, there is a tendency to criticise the values of young people, specifically regarding everything to do with individualism and lack of commitment. What is your opinion on this?

I imagine that this criticism comes mainly from the older generations. By contrast, I think that young people are more committed than ever today. What happens is that perhaps they don't have the same interests as our generation did. However, when there is something that really interests them, like climate change, they take to the streets and nothing will keep them quiet.

“I don't think that individualism is a bad thing if people are then capable of teamwork and sharing”.

In the past, since the structures were more hierarchical, we said yes to nearly everything. Now, however, opinions are expressed more openly. Of course, not everyone thinks the same, but that doesn't mean that young people aren't deeply committed.

And with respect to individualism, do you think that they are more individualistic now, or are they just as individualistic as other generations?

I actually don't believe that individualism is a bad thing. I even see it as something positive. Individualistic people are good if they are then capable of teamwork and sharing. Sometimes things need to be done individually. If you are able to concentrate on something and then share and work in a team, I don't see it as something negative.

Basically, values evolve, but not so quickly. What does evolve is the behaviour regarding those values.

How do you think that the leader figure will evolve in the coming generations?

I think that in future generations leaders will become coordinators. They will coordinate people, teams. They won't have such a decision-making role. They will naturally continue to make decisions, but their role will be more to coordinate and motivate.

What role do you think ethics play in companies?

Nowadays, ethics classes are given in schools and that is very important. However, if you act on the basis of certain fundamental values —that all of us have—, ethics is already part of you. It isn't something that you

“Values don't change from one generation to another. What evolves is the behaviour regarding those values”.

What are the main values that this generation has but previous generations did not?

I think that it is not so much a change in values as a change in skills. The (new) generations have skills. The technology that my children have had access to since the time when they were born is something that I didn't have when I was 20. Humanity, however, has been around for thousands of years, and fundamental values haven't changed so much. In 20 years it doesn't change so much. What has happened is an obvious progression —equality, sexual freedom, multiculturalism—, and these things make our behaviour evolve, but fundamental values don't change so quickly from one generation to another.

have to learn from outside. The same thing happens with children. When you are teaching them a value, you can't then go and act in a totally different way. However, if what you are teaching them are your values and you abide by those values, there is no need to explain what ethics are, because they are already implicit in your behaviour.

It is true that we are still coming across many actions carried out without taking ethics into account. I nevertheless hope that, thanks to what we have mentioned before regarding transparency, flexibility and the exchange of information, these bad practices will become less frequent.

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