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Leading in positive

Wolfgang Dold

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“We need leaders whose value system is based on trust and generosity”



Wolfgang Dold | German ambassador.

Ambassador Wolfgang Dold is the head of Germany's team of diplomatic representatives in the Kingdom of Spain. He commenced his duties as a member of the Foreign Service in 1986 after completing a degree in Law and studying at the German University of Administrative Sciences in Speyer. As ambassador, he represents a European nation that has marked the history of the continent and the rest of the world, and that currently sees itself as a mediator that seeks to settle conflicts by balancing interests in the long term.

We talk to him about the challenges of leadership in a globalised, vague and complex world, the universal values that every leader should acquire and the way to address Euroscepticism and the fake news appearing on the Internet every day.

You have a wealth of experience in the diplomatic arena. From that perspective, describe what the present-day leader should be like in a setting as volatile as the one that currently exists.

Our federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, summed it up at the Munich Security Conference when he said that, on the one hand, there is a growing need for clarity and certainty but, on the other, the

world is becoming even more ambiguous, complex and contradictory. Our diplomatic leaders have to be able to manage this ambivalence or polysemy whilst at the same time act in the face of uncertainty. In other words, developing tolerance to ambiguity is crucial in this day and age. We diplomats increasingly play the role of mediator, for example between our country and the host country.

“It is necessary to develop communication skills so that issues are not left in the hands of Eurosceptics or fake news on social media”

Communication skills are also more necessary than ever, and not just because of the omnipresence of social media. Ambassadors have to constantly promote our countries in the host country, but we also have to promote our foreign policy and Europe on the ground, in Germany, among our fellow citizens, so as not to leave this issue in the hands of Eurosceptic populism and the fake news created on the Internet.

The business world is becoming increasingly globalised. Leaders and projects have an international reach.

Continuing along that line, how do you believe that companies and large corporations should understand leadership nowadays?

In my view, good company management involves the managing director not having his or her sights set solely on the shareholders but also on the other stakeholders. Shareholders and customers are certainly important, but so too are team members, society and the institutions. It is important to take their needs into account as well. Like many others at present, we are discussing the issue of sustainability and the fight against climate change. We therefore need senior executives who tackle the issue through dialogue.

What are the universal values that every leader should possess, irrespective of their position or the country that they represent?

Essentially, an outstanding leader is not a lone wolf; rather, he or she needs motivated and competent team members who identify with the goals of the organisation. They should be capable of stimulating their team, achieving devotion to a common goal and offering each member the possibility of thinking, acting and personal development.

We need leaders whose value system is based on fundamental trust and generosity towards their team members.

Lastly, good leaders make decisions, take on responsibility; this is what their team members expect; it isn't enough to act as an intermediary between them.

What are the keys to managing and dealing with conflicts, whether in the diplomatic or business arena?

First and foremost, it would be to try and prevent and avoid conflicts and not merely manage or settle them. Indeed, for some years now we have been focusing heavily on the issue of crisis pre-emption and possible instruments at the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To this end, we have completed a fundamental reorganisation of the Ministry as part of a review process.

However, in international politics we are seeing an increasing “winner takes all” mentality. This way of thinking is stoking many new conflicts and intensifying old ones throughout the world.

German foreign policy has always seen itself as an intermediary that seeks to settle conflicts, providing a long-term balance of interests. This, in my opinion, is the only way to truly solve conflicts, whether in the diplomatic or economic arena.

What advice would you give to a young person entering the labour market in such a globalised world?

I would tell them that in order to get by in an increasingly globalised world, it is essential to be able to adapt to change, since technology evolves at a dizzying rate. They should continue to train throughout the whole of their professional career and never want to stop learning.

“Good leaders make decisions, take on responsibilities”

Similarly, I would advise them to never stop being curious, because what matters is not to be born with some special skill. What is really valuable is developing our interest in something. We can all learn and develop skills and abilities until we become experts. Albert Einstein said it. We are probably all familiar with his famous quote: “I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious”. Well, he went on to become Albert Einstein.

As regards training, what technical and emotional qualifications should leaders have in the future? What aspects are more significant now than they were a few years ago?

In the foreign service, as everywhere, our most important resource is our team. Consequently, at the ministry we start training our leaders very early at the diplomatic school. We are convinced that good leadership can be learned and trained. Our students in the diplomatic school have training modules in mediation, communication, negotiation and personnel management. What is more, the concept of foreign service leadership is geared towards lifelong learning. This is a process that must specifically guide each institution, company or public entity.

However, we also consider it important for our leaders to receive regular feedback, whether in personal appraisals or through their team members. Every year, partners are asked to assess the leadership ability of their superior.

However, leadership is not just a technical matter; it's also about attitude. Consequently, from the beginning we offer our leaders the possibility of raising questions in individual coaching sessions.

As regards people and team management, what qualities should a good leader have in order to be perceived as a role model by his/her teams?

Well, obviously everything that we have mentioned throughout this conversation. But I would add one more thing: credibility. In other words, leading by example. If you demand lifelong learning from your team members, you yourself must set an example. When team members are expected to take on responsibilities, you yourself must make decisions and assume them. If you want your team members to be responsible and reliable, be the one who takes the first step. I'm convinced of that.

“What matters is not to be born with some special skill. What is really valuable is developing our interest in something”

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