

Liderando en positivo

Interview with Joaquim Borrás Ferré

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“A leader is well prepared, experienced and, at the same time, is a good and humble person”

Joaquim Borrás Ferré, Executive Chairman of ISS España

ISS España's history is, without doubt, a clear example of leadership. The Danish multinational was incorporated in Spain 15 years ago, with just one employee. A launch that was made possible thanks to the determination and effort of that one employee, its current Executive Chairman, Joaquim Borrás Ferré. This native of Barcelona explains the keys to ISS's success based on the integration of services and, especially, the emphasis placed on training and its employees, “because a business is what it is thanks to its professionals”. This businessman knows that full well, since he created the company from scratch, thanks to his ability to trust and surround himself with the best colleagues. ISS España now has more than 30,000 employees and is the leading firm in the provision of integrated general services, offering all the services required in any facility.



Joaquim Borrás, Executive Chairman of ISS España.

The cliché of the chairman who started at the bottom is true in your case, as you began as a salesman in NILFISK. How does this professional career path influence your management model? What advantages does it give you when it comes to managing ISS? Do you feel that this is the best way to become a manager of a business?

Learning to do things from the bottom up is very important. Holding different positions within the same company helps you to understand and to gain a greater feeling of solidarity with co-workers. You know how difficult it can be, so you perceive things in a different way. You try to look for alternative ways of doing things... Going from nothing to the top in a flash is not a good thing.

How does someone prepare for being the leader of a business?

The most important thing is training: you must try not to get ahead of yourself and always be humble. You can't leave school to become a film director. It's the same in a company. You have to go through every phase: learning, broadening your knowledge, suffering.

That way, when you eventually hold positions of greater responsibility, you know how to set an example.

It is just as important, and even more so in a business like this, to know different languages. We provide courses at a global level, taking advantage of our international network, which is why it is fundamental that you know the language.

In a nutshell, a leader is well prepared, has work experience, speaks languages, is humble and is a good person. Because good people are able to forgive, adapt and do not sever relationships. You must be sympathetic, a good person, respectful, communicative and have sound ethics.

As a certified diving instructor, you are aware of the importance of choosing a good buddy before you submerge, but how can you be sure that those who accompany you in your business immersion are the most suitable?

I've been lucky. We have acquired 55 businesses in 10 years and I've had the good fortune to choose good colleagues in every one of them. At least, those whom I considered to be good. Normally, without even realising it, when you select or promote people, you are looking for a personality that is compatible with your own. In fact, you are promoting those people who fit into this culture or way of working. You will rarely find an aggressive person in our company, because that's not how I am.

What are ISS's leadership principles and which do you consider are fundamental for positive leadership?

A few years ago ISS management in various countries defined the qualities that we felt defined the ideal leader. The customer comes first. Without customers, we have no business.

Then, of course, we treat people with respect. This is almost as important as the customer, because if you

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do not take your employees into consideration, the company will never be a success

Performance is also important. Any business that says otherwise is not a business. An unprofitable company is an unsustainable one.

Innovation is also key: a business that doesn't change, like we did with service integration, ends up stagnating in the past. Even though people copy you, it is always best to be first. Looking for something different should be at the forefront of your mind every day. Lead by example. In moments of crisis, it's very easy to say: "you have to reduce costs" rather than "we have to reduce costs". We, as executives, should set the example by practising what we preach.

Empowerment is also important, encouraging decisions to be made at a level as close as possible to where the issues arise, enables us to respond to our client's needs immediately.

Another important issue is the development of one's self and the people in our teams, through the provision of training programmes. We feel that teamwork is also crucial. The team is important because one person alone can't make a success of a company like ours. This business is the achievement of many people. And the final leadership principle would be our trademark, one strategy and shared values, respecting each country's idiosyncrasies whilst sharing common values.

“In order to be productive, one must be capable and motivated. And motivation comes largely from an ability to make decisions”

ISS's commitment to service integration has been one of the keys to its success. Where does the drive to become a provider of global services come from?

We are really a business that provides just one service: to ensure that all aspects of a building function well. Therefore we don't consider it as a risk.

In these times of crisis, the ability to offer an integrated variety of services has helped us to grow. Despite what people may think, and unlike other companies with economic problems, instead of suffering a slump, we have grown. Our performance has been very positive, with a good margin.

Integration is an interesting concept because it enables someone to provide more than just one service throughout their professional career, undoubtedly making them a better person. In this way, we avoid the scenario in which a worker is "condemned" to clean the same hospital or be a security guard, throughout the whole of his or her working life.

By integrating services, we allow an employee to be multifunctional and, therefore, he or she is not obliged to always provide just one service.

How do approach a process of this kind, considering the risks involved for a business which, in principle, seems to be so diverse in terms of its range of services?

We achieve it with the required training. Integration is good for everybody. By mean of this system, everyone

wins: the employer and the employee. It is more fun, you delegate greater responsibility, you reduce costs and it even has an impact on the employee's salary.

It is a project which will eventually consolidate and spread; resulting in the disappearance of the typical cleaner. The future is one comprehensive service encompassing all the different services.

As mentioned, one of ISS's main commitments is to the training of its employees, including middle management and executives. What proportion of these programmes is dedicated to ISS's future planning, to anticipating its customer's possible needs?

We work better when we know what we are doing. Training is, therefore, extremely important. To be happy, we must feel motivated and feel capable. Someone has to encourage us, thank us and congratulate us so that we feel confident.

In order to be productive, one must be capable and motivated. And motivation comes largely from an ability to make decisions, because we feel better when we are able to decide. We have conveyed this decision-making ability to our professionals at every level of the organisation.

We are very aware that, in order for a business to run smoothly, you must invest in your people, because when they are motivated they provide a better service, the customer is happier and buys more and the shareholders receive greater returns. It is, after all, a process that demonstrates that investing in people is worthwhile.

In our business structure, made up of 30,000 employees, we realised that the key to effective training was middle management, those professionals who work with the employees on a daily basis. In order for employees to be well treated and well trained, they must have a boss who treats them well, is capable of identifying their training needs and ensures their occupational health and safety.

Therefore, we decided to train our middle managers, calling them “service managers”. We organised a national convention and we brought them all together to tell them about our project. We made them see that they were the key to change and to our project. Basically, they are the people who work with our employees every day, whom we make a living from and, therefore, the people in charge of motivating them. We asked them to tell us what they needed to create and encourage that motivation (types of vehicles; corporate email; PCs; company phones; classes in finance, marketing, etc.).

That is how the transformation began and how we trained our current service managers. That is the training we now replicate in the different decision-making positions throughout the company.

Without a doubt, one of the most positive aspects of the work performed by ISS is the work of its “Another Smile” foundation. How did this project start and what are the major milestones in its seven-year history?

This project came about by chance. When we began in 1999, the idea of “Social Responsibility” didn’t exist. The second business I bought had 200 employees with varying abilities, often termed “disabled”, but which I refer to as with “varying abilities” because they are able to perform our job, sometimes even better than we are.

We realised that it was appreciated by society at large, that it made you feel good and you realise that there are people who appreciate it. Thus, little by little, and with the help of Eduardo Conde of the NGO Codespa, the Foundation was born.

Of the more than 30,000 employees we have in Spain, 4,000 donate the spare cents from their pay check, which we use to help create jobs. We started in Ecuador, then in Peru, followed by a project in Morocco.

The Foundation is an internal project, so that our employees know that we are concerned about things,

“It is about leading by example. And as well as doing it, you have to repeat it a lot”

not just the idea of simply making money; so that they know that we care about people.

We have now begun to carry on the Foundation’s activities in Spain. We have given study grants to the employees’ children so that they can study at university; or we give them a job for three months, paid at market rate and not as an intern, so that they can be trained.

The Group has launched a campaign called “The Power of the Human Touch” to show how people, both customers and employees, are what matters most. How does one establish a Human Resources policy that is not only knowledge based, but value based?

By practising what you preach and passing on that culture. Some of our most important values are honesty, respect for others, empowerment. We are able to pass on this culture by doing it and saying it. I have personally visited every business we have bought the day after the purchase, which is the moment in which people are most scared. I passed on this business’ message and our values to everyone. We also do this in the annual meetings and in our corporate magazine, in which we analyse our leadership principles and illustrate them with real employee situations in each issue.

It is about leading by example. And as well as doing it and passing it on, you have to repeat it a lot. And when you think you have repeated it enough, you repeat it again, and even then that’s not enough.

“A company must be responsible; you can't do business harming people or the environment”

Nowadays, businesses are obliged to make a firm commitment to the environment and the CSR. What actions has ISS taken in this area?

A company must be responsible; you can't do business harming people or the environment. At ISS, we contribute through many internal and client-focused measures. In fact, our star product during the crisis has been the Operating Costs Optimisation Programme (“POCO”), which is based on optimising costs while taking three variables into consideration: not harming people or even improving their quality of life; not harming the environment or even contributing to its improve and, lastly, being economical and reducing costs.

As a result, our biggest customer in Spain requested us to optimise its costs in 2008. What we did in this connection was to go from cleaning at night, when employees get paid supplement, to cleaning during the day. Since the supplement paid was higher than the optimisation requested by the client, we achieved their cost-reduction objective. Furthermore, and despite certain level of resistance from the employees (since the shift change resulted in a reduction in salary), all the jobs were maintained and working during the day improved the employees' quality of life in terms of their work-life balance, health and well-being. Lastly, since there was no night shift, the customer's energy consumption dropped by 25%.

Another good example is Telefónica, where we got rid of the more than 15,000 waste paper baskets in the company's buildings. With this decision, we eliminated the use of 15,000 plastic bags every day and saved work for cleaning staff in terms of both time and effort, as they no longer had to clean the bins. More efficient recycling management was also achieved at the companies, since all types of waste had been mixed in the waste paper baskets and, without them, more responsible waste management came into practice.

These are two examples of how optimisation can be achieved without harming people or the environment and being economically efficient.

In an economic climate like that of today, what message would you send out to a young person who had just finished his or her studies and was about to enter the labour market?

To be a good person, spare no effort, show an eagerness to work, be humble, learn from those around you and never stop learning. I think that it has a lot to do with each individual's nature. It's very important to be sincere, be yourself and not pretend to be something you're not; in the end you'll get caught out and it'll be even worse for you.

I would tell that person to never give up hope, be patient and, in short, to persevere and not lose the interest in doing it, because it's difficult...but not impossible.

Contact

CONFEDERACIÓN ESPAÑOLA DE DIRECTIVOS Y EJECUTIVOS - CEDE

World Trade Center
Moll de Barcelona, s/n Edificio Sur 3ª planta
08039 Barcelona (Spain)
Tel. +34 93 508 83 20
Fax. +34 93 508 83 21
Email: info@directivoscede.com