

IEDC alumni Success Story



A School with a View

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Mark Pleško,
Co- Founder and CEO of Cosylab, MBA 1996 and AAA winner 2018

“LEADERSHIP IS RESPONSIBILITY TO MY TEAM: BEING FIRST IN BATTLE AND TAKING THE LARGEST HITS SO THAT OTHERS CAN MOVE ON WITH LESS EFFORT”

“The Doc” Mark Pleško is a Founder and CEO of Cosylab, one of most innovative high-tech European companies and the world’s leading provider of control systems for the planet’s most complex machines; nuclear accelerators, optical and radio telescopes, fusion reactors, cancer therapy systems and much more. Apart from leading by example in Cosylab, Dr. Mark Pleško plays active roles in international institutions, councils, associations and societies. He is also a member and a working party co-leader of the EU – Japan Business Round Table, whose members are senior executives from some 50 leading European and Japanese companies. The whole IEDC Alumni community has been proud and inspired over the years by his personality, enthusiastic leadership, business achievements and outstanding networking skills. Mark is a great researcher, scientist, entrepreneurial achiever, academic role model and a leader. Any most importantly he is working hard to be a good husband and a good father.



Interviewed by Iva Eibel, IEDC

Mark, you are a Founder and CEO of Cosylab, company with more than 190 employees and a home to engineers, physicists, chemists, computer scientists as well as professionals from various social science fields. There is even one medical doctor! You yourself are a doctor of physics and have been a researcher for a long part of your career and now you are one of the most admired leaders in Slovenia and abroad. What would you say is the winning recipe for a scientist to become such a good leader and run a successful company?

I'm not sure whether I am really admired, or even admirable :-) But OK, I can tell you about my simple recipe: I'm just lucky. I got some in my genes (my father was a managing director, albeit in a small import/export company), I learned a lot from my teachers, especially my PhD supervisor, who was an excellent leader and I was fascinated by biographies of leaders, which gave me the right inspiration. The other secret is: the real eye opener was the executive MBA course I have taken at the IEDC. Only then did I realize that it takes more than just being smart to be a good leader. Actually I still remember Nenad (Filipović) reprimanding me after a bad group work, saying: "You might be a leader, but you are not a good manager.« So I followed his advice and focused on what I was good at :-)

At IEDC we really look up to Peter Drucker's teachings and one of his very often used quotes is "Culture eats strategy for breakfast". What kind of culture do you have in Cosylab and how do you support it?

I have lived this quote many times in my life, for good and for bad. It is difficult to describe our culture in full, because it is in many respects an image of what I am or to be more precise, what I want or pretend to be. A simpler way is to list our values. Important values for Cosylab are openness, the ability to criticize, respectful treatment and the permission to make mistakes - typical values from the academic environment, where I come from.

What was your biggest challenge in driving Cosylab from a small start-up to a company that has become the world leader in large physics control systems?

Honestly, I don't know. There were so many challenges and we just kept removing one obstacle after the other as they appeared. Actually, if I had known all these challenges in advance, I would have never dared to even dream about building such a company. But one thing I can say: once we believed we could achieve something, then we somehow did it. So the biggest challenge might have been ourselves, our fears and limitations.

The business you are in uses a lot of technology. What kind of emerging technologies do you think will impact your work most in the close future?

Everybody talks about the emergence of AI and Big Data, but in reality, they are already here. And they are also not a magical solution, but just a tool like any other that a good engineer knows when to apply and when not to. But in reality, the whole point of technology is that it changes too fast for me to be able to make good predictions. All I can do is take bets on certain technologies,

if possible multiple bets on different technologies. On the other hand: as long as you're in the early majority, you're on the safe side. So just watch what your competitors and partners are doing. Of course, the big profits are for those who make the right bets at the right time. But often, this is more a matter of luck than insight. Or to quote the famous quantum physicist, Niels Bohr: "predictions are very difficult, especially when they are about the future" :-)

Cosylab's experts are doing miracles in bringing the cutting edge research into real life. How can Universities and educational institutions follow your example and start working closer with more general public and make research more relevant for wider audiences?

If you really think that we're doing miracles, then this is only praise for our marketing department and their PR efforts. :-) We're just working hard and trying to make money by developing what we believe people are willing to pay for. And that's the recipe how to bring value to academic research. We should be careful though not to request marketable products from basic research. Each type of research has a certain reason, not necessarily just for the market and consumer products. We should therefore let researchers be researchers. However, every now and then, there is a researcher with an entrepreneurial spirit, just like I was, and these people should be encouraged to go out and make a company, commercializing the knowledge they have gathered. Here, the Americans are the best - even the Germans complain that they don't do it in sufficient quantity.

You've completed your MBA studies in 1996 and have been since then regularly sending your colleagues to IEDC programs and seminars. Looking back at your days at IEDC, what was the most beneficial outcome you got during studies?

I was still a researcher when I did my MBA - I have started my company only 5 years later. But it was undoubtedly the MBA, which gave me the confidence that I can also work in business, not just in science. Sure, I got a lot of knowledge too, but that could have

been just theoretical, if I haven't learned that business people are just normal people, like you and me :-)

What is your favorite memory of IEDC studies? Or Professor?

I have lots of fond memories, from professors and from my schoolmates with many of which I still have good relations, even in business. Some of our class still meet regularly at least once per year. The above mentioned quote by Nenad is certainly a positive memory, despite the way it sounds.

And then all the professors - yes, Jim Ellert was teaching Finance and was a legend already then, and I liked and remember fondly many other professors that are not on the faculty anymore. But the most lasting memory for sure is Danica. She is the personification of the school - she was and still is like our principal, teacher, motivator, mother, consciousness - all in one person. Those who have attended the IEDC know what I am talking about - they don't need any words - and those that haven't experienced her will never understand.



MEET BARBARA PERSONALLY

My friends describe me as ...

... a workaholic. But that's not true at all! I am a lazybone, who just tries to do all the work today so that he is free tomorrow. Unfortunately, those emails don't stop at midnight :-)

I am inspired by ...

... challenges. Tell me it can't be done and you got me on the job.

When I think of leadership, I think of ...

... Myself! No, that's a joke :-) Well, actually, I do think of myself, because I always think about what I have to do to improve my leadership. But if you want a memorable quote: For me, leadership is responsibility to my team: being first in battle and taking the largest hits so that others can move on with less effort.

I find peace and relaxation in ...

... my home in a tiny village in the Karst (Kras), where I live a simple rural life in nature, whenever I am not jet setting around the world.