

Outstanding achievements come from passion and devotion



An Interview with CEEMAN Champions 2010

By Milenko Gudić

With the launch of the CEEMAN Champion Award, CEEMAN wanted to further promote and foster excellence in the areas that are considered critical for the success in business education and leadership development: research, teaching, course design and program development, and institution building.

The first winners of the CEEMAN Champion Awards - Peter Trkman, Slovenia (in management research); Themis Suwardy, Singapore (in management teaching); Tibor Vörös, Hungary (in innovation in course design), and Gennady Lazarev, Russia (in institution building) - were announced at the gala dinner of the 18th CEEMAN Annual Conference on 24 September in Naples, Italy.

In order to enable CEEMAN readership to learn more about the winners of the CEEMAN 2010 Champion Awards and the lessons we could draw from their outstanding achievements, we interviewed the Champions, asking them to respond to the questions that are relevant for the respective areas of their excellence and for business education and leadership development in general. We also wanted to hear how these awards were perceived in their respective institutions.

The ideas expressed by the CEEMAN 2010 Champions provide interesting food for thought and also an inspiration for their colleagues and faculty from other CEEMAN member institutions to continue their strive for excellence and outstanding achievements in their respective areas of activity.

Milenko Gudić: It is well known that a majority of business process redesign and technology implementation efforts in both corporate and public sector fail due to poor leadership, the lack of demonstrated business value, or poorly managed risks.

Peter, your research enabled you to get a first-hand insight into the critical success factors and risks involved. What do you think business schools should do to develop leadership and managerial capabilities that would facilitate organizations and institutions to more effectively and efficiently benefit from advancement in information technology?

Peter Trkman: Obviously the technological development in recent years is unprecedented. However, as we always notice, it is not (solely) about technology but rather about how we can use it. After an initial hype (when some expected that all learning would be online) the challenges of business schools remain pretty much the same: how to motivate students to seek and explore, not just listen to their teachers; how to convince faculty members to share their knowledge and experience and perhaps most importantly, how to quickly adapt programs to the changing needs of the market.

Another issue is the changing culture of our students. Undergraduate students of today were born in the Internet society (sometimes called Generation Y) and expect a more vivid way of lecturing.

To summarize, in business process terminology: the "support processes" in business schools have changed drastically; lots of teaching-related paperwork with grades, notices for students, etc was removed, new ways of marketing our programs emerged (for example, our school has a fan page on Facebook).

However, the "core process" is still the same: how to "equip" students both with knowledge and also skills to obtain new knowledge when needed.

MG: Your nomination for the CEEMAN Champion Award in research emphasizes not only that you are the highest ranked among faculty members at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana, by the number of papers published in SCI/SSCI indexed journals in the last five years, but also your ability to include state-of-the-art research results into the classroom. What is your personal experience regarding the impact that this makes on the learning process and outcomes, both from the teacher's and students' point of view?



Peter Trkman

PT: Any active researcher must read hundreds of papers, books, and cases before being able to contribute something to the body of knowledge. Therefore members of the faculty who are active in research are more likely to be up-to-date in discipline-specific knowledge and can use their research findings in preparing teaching materials.

This is even truer in my fields: logistics and information systems management, where things tend to change quickly. While this is certainly exciting both for me and the students, it demands a constant update of content and materials for my courses.

However, the above does not suffice to claim that we research problems that are relevant to the practice – the students certainly need knowledge that is applicable in practice, not theoretical research results! Therefore I am quite active in consulting projects, especially in the fields of business process management, logistics, and information technology adoption. Several of my papers stem directly out of these projects. In such a way the research results should have extremely relevant practical implications as well and this makes them more interesting for students, too.

But the most important is passion – passion for the topic, passion for discovering new things and transferring them to either research colleagues or students.

MG: Themin, your nomination for the CEEMAN Champion Award in teaching describes you as a “consistent star in the classroom, who continues his teaching outside the classroom”, while you describe your teaching philosophy as “simply providing the conditions for students to learn”. What are the main guiding principles in your teaching philosophy and the main building blocks in your teaching strategy?

Themin Suwardy: The approach I take in my courses is centered on three guiding principles: (a) individual learning, (b) collaborative learning, and (c) instructor-facilitated learning. I emphasize these three principles at the start of each term and ask students to be active participants in their learning.

I am a firm believer that the best way to teach accounting is to do it in “3D”: through theories, cases, and stories.

Theories are what students learn from textbooks, the methodological, structured, and systematic study of a discipline. Cases and stories are real-life examples that I incorporate into my courses to demonstrate the application of theories and concepts in textbooks to actual annual reports, financial statements, and disclosure practices.

MG: As an innovator in teaching, but also in the use of technology in the educational process at the Singapore Management University, how do you see the future impact of technology development on the “3D” components of the learning process that you advocate, through theory, case studies, and stories? Here we also refer to the learning culture and expectations that come with the new generations of students and youth in general.

TS: The new generation of students wants to seek knowledge and they want to do it without constraints of the physical walls of classrooms. As educators, we need to embrace technology as it allows us to “enlarge” our classrooms.

Theories are no longer limited to hard copy textbooks. Corporations are using the Internet to reach out to their shareholders and we can bring many financial reporting examples for classroom discussions.

Unfortunately, technology also creates so much information, and it takes time to shift through the materials and select the ones that will advance our course objectives.

MG: Tibor, Central European University, Budapest emphasized in your nomination for CEEMAN Champion Awards in Course Design that your integrative “Boardroom Executive Exercise” project had become the most praised component of the degree program. Which student expectations and aspirations explain such a positive response to this program and what kind of new integrative programs do you believe we need in MBA education in the future?

Tibor Vörös: The Boardroom Executive Exercise was fundamentally driven by a need to integrate core MBA subject matter and provide a safe environment where students can practice what they

Themin Suwardy



learn – many educational theories emphasize the need for such an approach (action learning, learn-by-doing, or simulation approaches in general). The Boardroom Executive Exercise is grounded in those theories but has evolved considerably from its original purpose.

Consider that one of the things we all experience is a level of information overload and subsequent change. It may sound a laughable proverb that the only constant element is change but it is quite correct.

In our connected global world various information sources (such as emails, social network messages, news feeds, and many other elements) require individuals to be able to categorize and absorb new information at short notice and initiate the required change process.

Are we well prepared for this? Is the usual “cause and effect” pattern engraved in our brains a good approach to handle these situations? More importantly, do we prepare our students for these situations?

Thus the simulated Board Meetings (participants become Board Members of an imaginary international energy corporation) not only aim at integrating across disciplines but also to help students develop and fine tune their problem-solving and information gathering and handling skills. Participants have to deal with issues ranging from everyday operational problems to long-term strategic goals.

Many of these issues are tackled in the usual MBA curricula (Action Learning, Systems Thinking, Critical Thinking, Change Management – just to name a few standalone courses) but I do believe that the best learning experience comes from joining and integrating these elements together – and this is what the Boardroom Exercise offers and students enjoy and appreciate.

MG: Your current academic research concentrates on curriculum internationalization and cross-cultural issues. What are the main trends, challenges, and opportunities for business schools when it comes to cross-cultural management education?

TV: I will try to be fairly concise on this one: curriculum internationalization is an issue that has been discussed many times and it has been an ongoing initiative for several years, supported by various international organizations.

The need is obvious: companies today not only expect their employees to fit the overall profile of the organization and have the necessary know-how and skill set in their given area of expertise but in many cases to also be able to travel and participate in international projects and work teams.

In other words, organizations require many of their current and prospective employees to successfully cope with the challenges posed by the



Tibor Vörös

global marketplace. Understanding these trends and the associated shifts in demand is a key concept for business schools.

And yet, from the operational point of view there are very few frameworks available for educators: I usually discuss three levels in this context, namely International Awareness, International Competence, and International Expertise. The highest level, International Expertise, implies that students become global professionals, at home in many locations and many cultures.

But what does it mean to be at home in many cultures? My favorite example is that one prepares for a negotiation with a Scandinavian firm. Based on (rather unfortunate) cultural stereotypes and certain cross-cultural books one would expect to have minimal bargaining.

And what happens in practice? One’s counterpart may well turn out to be a person from a different culture with expectations for a long bargaining process and all one’s preparations were for naught.

In short, envisaging an internationalization process and/or cross-cultural course outcome, I would aim at making sure that participants are able to transcend their childhood acculturation and respect very different cultures. The implications of the above example for managers is that one should learn to construct “third cultures” in various operations.

MG: Gennady, in your strategic approach to leading and managing your school one of the main objectives was to develop an institutional strategic mentality, which would enable your university to grow as a self-developing organization. What were the main challenges that you faced in the process of leading change in this direction, and what were the key success factors in making this change happen?

Gennady Lazarev: Team mentality is a thing that is difficult to influence or change. Our main challenges are seated in our own consciousness. Some years ago when the university administration initiated reforms necessary for our survival, we felt that most of our staff and faculty did not support these reforms and were afraid of such changes or just not ready for them.



Gennady Lazarev

It was difficult for some people to develop something that would not be realized in the near future alongside their daily routine work.

The other challenge was that the university had no managers in the field of education and there was no entrepreneurial culture, which, indeed, was never supported in universities of the Soviet period.

To change passive and even negative attitude to reforms, we decided to define specific objectives that showed what the university would aim at and try to reach. Step by step we engaged more and more staff and faculty in this process and our personnel began to understand our aims. People recognized and accepted the fact that change will always be there because the world around changes quickly and often unpredictably.

We have to learn to work in conditions of continuous changes and to manage these changes. And I suppose it is the most difficult side of the process of our continuous personnel education.

Another factor of our success is implementation of strategic approach and innovative technologies in university management – this more scientific approach found wide and efficient practical application at VSUES.

MG: Your nomination for the CEEMAN Champion Award in the institution management category emphasizes your great contribution in making the Vladivostok State University of Economics and Service an important partner and change agent in the economic and social development of the region. What are the areas and modalities of cooperation with other stakeholders in which management development institutions could best perform this function in the future?

GL: Today, the success of a higher educational institution depends on the concerted actions of all participants in the educational process, including faculty and management teams of the university, students and their parents, community leaders, and representatives from business and administration.

We always monitor all changes in cooperation between the university and stakeholders. The purpose of such relations stays unchanged for us – to

attain new quality of educational, research, and other university services. The correspondence of education content with today's labor market necessities is the major quality standard.

That is why in the program "VSUES strategic partnership for 2009-2011" the leading role is allocated to the business community. Nowadays the university is not only interested in possible deep transformation, which will definitely, step by step, lead to quality changes in training and research and bring tangible results in the long term, but also in its own market interests.

It is about university expectations coupled with an expanded range of services, principally by means of applied research, consulting services, and life-long education. In this kind of cooperation, university expectations correspond to business expectations.

MG: All of you, the CEEMAN 2010 Champions, have already received a number of prestigious awards and recognition for your past achievements. In this context, how do you experience the CEEMAN Champion Award that you have just received? Related to this is the question on how this award was perceived by your colleagues and the institution as a whole?

PT: As said at the gala dinner: I consider this as the most important award of my career so far. The conference in Caserta/Naples was my first attendance at a CEEMAN event and I was extremely impressed both by the breadth and vividness of this organization and its many initiatives. The fact that it was awarded by an association that includes 180 members from all over the world makes it especially important.

The award confirmed the impact of my research and gave me new motivation for future work. The award is now safely on my office desk, its beautiful design being admired by colleagues and students.

TS: It was a pleasant surprise to receive the CEEMAN 2010 Champion Award. Being there in Naples to receive the award was most memorable and I was impressed by the closeness of the CEEMAN family and their shared goals of improving the quality of management education. Many of my colleagues are familiar with CEEMAN through their previous (and continuing) participation in IMTA and other CEEMAN initiatives. The award is really one that we all share at SMU for all the things we do for our students.

TV: First of all, I am truly honored to have received the CEEMAN Champion Award. I think I can justly say (particularly by looking at the number of interviews and media coverage from the last two months) that the Central European University is even more proud of the Award. I do think that there is a need to recognize outstanding achievements in the Central European region

– and the introduction of the CEEMAN Awards is a unique and extremely important step in this context. I wish all the best for this wonderful tradition and look forward to greeting the Champions next year.

In a slightly less formal context, let me note (and warn future Champions) that I wasn't quite prepared for the expectations: in some of my lectures I had the impression that my students were expecting a 10-meter giant with blaring audiospeakers and a full-blown Industrial Light & Magic show on the spot... But that is the price of fame, I guess.

GL: The quality of our university management was highly appreciated on the national level: in 2009 VSUES got the Award on Quality of the Russian Federation Government. And it is really important for us how society estimates our activity. That is why the logical continuation of our social responsibility efforts was joining the PRME initiative and becoming a member of CEEMAN in 2009.

The CEEMAN award is an international recognition of successful management processes, which enable our university to provide high-level education. Taking into account that we aimed at the top quality and responsibility standards, this award is really prestigious for us and all VSUES members are very proud.

It is not possible to become a successful manager alone - you always have people who are following you, who are sharing your ideas, and putting them into effect. This is a great honor and appreciation of success for all our team.