

FINDING AN AUTHENTIC VOICE AS A GLOBAL BUSINESS LEADER

Harmonizing personal values with one's authentic style while respecting other cultures, adapting to new settings, occasions, and opportunities is the key to finding purpose and success in life. From cooperating with team members to showing resilience in the face of challenges, a set of personal values is vital in one's personal and professional path. Beyond a set of personal values though, one also needs to understand their heritage, and in turn, embrace their authenticity.

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I feel very lucky to be born and raised in Turkey where there is a long history of world civilizations and rich culture of amalgamated experiences.



I was educated at Robert College and Boğaziçi University—both highly respected educational institutions that deliver an American system of education. After graduating as an industrial engineer, I decided to finish my MBA with a thesis focusing on consumer insights. Soon after, I started to work in the marketing department of the American company, Colgate-Palmolive. This role was based in Turkey. After working there for six and a half years, I left my position and started to work at PepsiCo. Living and working in numerous cities and countries such as Hong Kong, Dubai, and the US during my tenure at PepsiCo made me a global citizen. As of December 2019, I have completed my 25 years with the company, a milestone to celebrate.

When moving to other locations, one starts to understand the importance of coming from a rich cultural heritage. In this instance, being Turkish had its advantages. We are European, Asian, and Middle Eastern, and for many years now, have been an ally of the US. We have excellent listening and conversational skills that emanate from being direct and our respect for other cultures. Although we are impatient, in terms of immediately wanting to see results from a business point of view, we also like to connect on a friendly basis before diving into business. Moreover, we have the agility to adapt to change and the tenacity to deal with ambiguity. We are young as a nation and ready to take on challenges. The diverse background of the population in Turkey creates a nation with a proud and strong identity.

Studying in a high school and college influenced by the American education system has allowed me to be an independent thinker. As a young student, I learned to question, research, debate, and voice my opinions at these institutions. My personal involvement in Turkish folklore for 12 years inflicted me with a deep understanding of the cohesion and harmony arising from differences.

While some of the traits I gained throughout my education supported me in my professional journey, at other times, I had to adapt and adjust. After all, leadership is all about assessing the situation and adjusting your style in a way to have a win-win outcome. It does not matter where you come from or who you are. Listening,

understanding, and empathizing are crucial in building trust and respect. These have been my values for many years, and that is the way I was able to move across various countries for different roles.

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Set of Values

Every individual has a “set of values”, and this value group starts to form in childhood. School and family life, in addition to social activities, accomplishments, and obstacles experienced in one’s lifetime, constitute this value group. With time, this value group becomes a part of our business life and forms our leadership model. As a result, this leadership model affects our job performance, the way we work, our style of building and developing a team, and our role within the team. I believe our effectiveness, sincerity, and happiness as a leader depends on how much we know ourselves, our “set of values”, and our strengths and weaknesses.

What is my “set of values”, and how has it been formed over the years?

Firstly, passion. I do my job with passion and reflect this onto other people. When I say passion, the word “dancing” immediately comes to my mind. As I mentioned earlier, I was involved in folk dancing throughout my school years, either as a player, team leader, or mentor/coach, but always primarily as a team member. The fusion of music and rhythm turning into a dance has always excited me. Up until today, I have tried to feel this passion in all the work I have done. If I could not feel it, then I knew that it was time for a change. Change could be developing a new project, changing the system, enriching the work, or moving to another role. Altogether, I believe that passion is critical in one’s work. If there is no passion, then the job is not right for you.

The second value is determination for achievement. If someone has determination for achievement, anybody with any given desire can achieve the results they want. Before setting goals, a leader should set the vision together with team members, which will motivate the whole team. In this regard, my mother has been very influential in my personal life. Although I would get good grades as a student, she always believed I could do better, and supported me to set higher goals.

The third value is listening, understanding, and empathizing. While running towards targets as a leader, we should run together with our team and the whole company. This race may sometimes be a speed race and sometimes a marathon. In any case, we can realize a successful race in accordance with how accurately we can hear and understand our organization's principles and values. When I look back at my career, the best position which gave me the understanding of these values, and the opportunity to execute them, was my time as a Human Resources Director. I had worked in marketing for about 10 years before being asked to take the Human Resources Director position at Frito Lay Turkey, a PepsiCo company. I had very little time to think about it, and after a night of thinking, I said "yes", because I believed that I could bring a new perspective by assuming that employees could be a target group, just like consumers are. During my three years in this position, I learned a lot while contributing to the company. I learned the importance of building dialogue with individual employees across all departments of the company, to listen well, and to make fair decisions as a leader. We cannot achieve success without listening to and understanding our employees. A company cannot move forward without informing their employees of their undertakings. This was a very crucial and enlightening experience after my marketing role. I have been back in Human Resources since August 2013.

The fourth value is that dialogue with employees should be open, respectful, and trustworthy. This value not only frames the way we do our job but also affects the communication between our consumers, customers, and shareholders. Moreover, it frames our moral existence and general standing as a leader. No matter who we are in contact with, the "openness, respect, and trust" triangle is always important. I inherited this approach from my dear father. He was a government official, and two of the most defining aspects of his character was his trustworthiness and dedication to his work. Unfortunately, we lost him about 29 years ago. However, his values have carried on, as my sister and I still embrace his strong work ethic to this day. If we can share these values with our employees, I believe we can achieve the best.

The fifth value is cooperation, which includes eagerness to support and work with your coworkers and employees. Asking for and giving support is key in building a trustworthy environment in order to experience the pleasure of accomplishment as a team. In 1999 and 2001, when I was Sales/Marketing Director and General Manager, I had two remarkable experiences where I found the chance to understand this value very well. The first one was when our plant suffered serious damage after the 1999 earthquake in Turkey. After the incident, we came together as a team to lift ourselves, and each other, back up. The other one was the economic crisis in 2001, when the Turkish Lira devaluated against the US dollar by 25 percent in one

evening.¹ During these times of crises, we focused on the target and always knew that we had each other's back. This has become a part of our company culture today. We know that many obstacles can be surmounted with "team spirit".

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The sixth value is perseverance and resilience. In January 2010, after many years and jobs in Turkey, my home country, I was presented with the opportunity to take on the role of President of the Asia Pacific region at PepsiCo that was based in Hong Kong. Before this date, I was able to advance my career, based in Istanbul, from Marketing Director to General Manager and then to President of South East Europe. However, this new role was not a role I could have executed from Istanbul. Therefore, in 2010, my family and I decided to move to Hong Kong, which was one of the biggest changes in our lives. We relocated with my husband and our two sons, and started to set up our new life in the March of that year. I am very grateful to my husband and children for supporting me in this journey. Without their support, it would not have been possible. Such a big change needed a lot of perseverance and resilience. In our careers, we make many decisions; some are easier than others, but some are critical and sometimes tough. We need not only the courage to make these decisions, but the perseverance and resilience to continue through them; and needless to say, we need the support of our loved ones throughout it all.

The last one is about perspective. I moved to Dubai on 18 August 2013 to take on the role of Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) for Asia, the Middle East, and Africa at PepsiCo. My boss, Mr. Saad Abdul-Latif, who had selected me for this role, passed away the next day, on 19 August 2013. That same day, also being the first day of my new role, I was looking forward to our meeting in the office. The news of his death came as a shock. He had relentlessly worked for PepsiCo for 30 years, he loved what he did, and not only was a great leader but a great mentor for me as well. When we lost him, my perspective about my priorities changed. Real pain comes with the loss of loved ones. Other things in life can somehow be managed or digested, but loss is the most difficult one to accept. You never get used to it, you just learn to live with it. Instead of focusing on what comes next, we need to appreciate what we currently have in hand. Therefore, staying in the present moment is very important.

¹ "Turkey Floats Currency, and it Falls 25%," *New York Times*, 23 February 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/23/business/turkey-floats-currency-and-it-falls-25.html>

These seven values are very important to me. My personal “set of values” and the culture of my company, PepsiCo, resemble each other, which in turn makes my leadership more effective. If one’s personal values do not match those of their company, one inevitably becomes unhappy and unsuccessful.

Furthermore, it is very important for a company to support personal development and improve its policies regarding work-life balance. In this regard, PepsiCo develops remarkable initiatives and applies many policies of work-life balance from which everyone can benefit. The starting point of these policies are sometimes women, but in the end, these policies are always pursued for everyone.

The Importance of Authenticity

From my personal values, I would like to come back to the connection between Turkish and American cultures, and how this connection can harmoniously create growth, innovation, independent thinking, and success. It is key for individuals to understand their roots and what shaped them in order to become successful in an authentic way. Keeping this authenticity is critical in business, leadership, and talent management. People today, more than ever, look for that authentic voice and can detect anything that is fake.

In that regard, I find the two leadership programs in 2006-2007 that I have attended very important for reflection. The first one was “Authentic Woman Leader” in 2006 and the second one was “Leading with Purpose” in 2007. Both programs had the same main subject of “Authentic Leadership”, which I have found very relevant to myself. While the first program was mostly from a woman’s perspective, the second one had a more general perspective.

The book *True North*, by Bill George and Peter Sims, which I read after attending these programs, examines the subject of “Authentic Leadership” in a clear and simple language while providing factual examples. In the book, the authors state: “Just as a compass points toward a magnetic field, your True North pulls you toward the purpose of your leadership. When you follow your internal compass, your leadership will be authentic and the people will naturally want to associate with you.”² Moreover, in order to discover your “Authentic Leadership”, you need to know your authentic self, practice your values and principles, build your support team, stay grounded, and empower people to lead.

In the beginning of your career, you do not spend as much time reflecting on these

² Bill George and Peter Sims, *True North: Discover Your Authentic Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. xxiii.

matters. However, in time, with more experience, it is a good idea to spend some time thinking about your values. It is important to reflect on how they impact you, and aligned with these values, how you need to adjust to places, situations, and the opportunities you encounter. It is important to start this journey early, the sooner the better.

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Supporting Your Community

I personally found value in my Turkish background throughout my different roles and foreign assignments. The first move is always the most difficult, especially if it is far away in a land of several cultures. In our case, Hong Kong was the example. I managed 25 countries in the Asia Pacific region, ranging from Japan and Australia, to Pakistan and Southeast Asian nations. It was very important to understand the basics of different cultures and to successfully adapt to their needs without losing your authenticity and conceding your values. Meanwhile, you also start thinking about the “purpose” — purpose of your role and leadership with these kind of responsibilities.

In Turkey, as I was managing different businesses, I observed various opportunities to support our communities. The closest to my heart was the project, “Reading Rooms”, now known as the “GAP-Cheetos Children Development Centers”, we developed in Southeastern Turkey. We launched the GAP-Cheetos Children Development Centers in 2003 with the aim of creating an environment where school-age and pre-school children in the 4-14 age group could study, and benefit from sports, culture, and art activities. These centers were designed to support children’s physical, mental, emotional, personal, and social development. Moreover, these centers helped to take the first steps towards a healthier society by raising the awareness of families.

Within the scope of the project which was initialized in Batman in 2003, centers where children in the 4-14 age group could study and do research alongside several social, cultural, artistic, and athletic activities that would support their physical, mental, and social development were established. Since then, at the facilities in Adıyaman’s Merkez and Gölbaşı districts, Batman’s Merkez district, Diyarbakır’s Silvan district, Kilis’s Merkez district, Mardin’s Kızıltepe, Nusaybin, and Ömerli

districts, Siirt's Merkez district, Şanlıurfa's Hilvan district, and Kocaeli's Suadiye district—where PepsiCo plants are located—various programs such as early childhood events, educational as well as arts and cultural activities, and team sports have been organized to encourage an active lifestyle for children. These centers' aim is to provide a platform for children to communicate with each other and help them socialize, as well as support them while making a career choice for the future. In addition to courses like mathematics, social studies, and Turkish, children also benefit from different courses such as computer, foreign languages, violin, guitar, etc. Furthermore, training programs and awareness-raising activities are carried out for families as well. We are proud of our centers that have been providing social, cultural, physical, and educational development support to 30,000 children aged between 4-14 since 2003.

The "GAP-Cheetos Children Development Centers" is not the only project we carried out with the goal to eliminate inequality of opportunity that arises from the cultural, social, and economic circumstances of Southeastern Anatolia. Although our Centers are limited to the 4-14 age group, we have always dreamt of extending the age group beyond. Within the scope of "Our Girls Are Going to School" project—a project we have been carrying out since 2009—we provide funding to meet the educational expenses of our successful girls who frequently visit our Centers. The project also includes high school students who are unable to continue their education due to the social and economic conditions of their families. We try to take care of all the problems of our project's beneficiaries at any time. While only 20 girls benefited from the project in its first year, 82 girls in total benefit from the project today. With this project, we were able to expand the 4-14 age limit, and the Development Centers' area of responsibility to a greater level. Furthermore, we help our girls reach a more equal and stronger position in society and life. With these projects, we introduce all aspects of contemporary life to our children, and contribute to their development so they are able to make independent decisions while being conscious individuals who contribute to society.

When I moved to Hong Kong, I observed similar circumstances in Asia that required educational and developmental support. For example, Myanmar was lacking a youth development system while the Philippines and Vietnam were still deprived of clean water sources. I was a supporter of PepsiCo's sustainability initiatives around the region, which included "Water Hope" in the Philippines and Vietnam, "Liter of Light" in the Philippines, sustainable product initiatives in Australia, and several water and energy recon initiatives in Pakistan. I also spearheaded the PepsiCo Asia Pacific's project launch of the "Center of Excellence for Business Skills Development", in partnership with the Myanmar Ministry of Education, the Yangon

Institute of Economics, and UNESCO, which provides vocational training to the young people of Myanmar to help them successfully transition into the workforce.

Conclusion

All of these projects were akin to my work ethic, and helped me carry out my moral duties as a leader. I still see the value of these projects reflect onto my professional and personal life in the United States. After I arrived here in 2016, I saw the importance of community and supporting our community members. In that sense, my first experience after moving was with an organization called Neighbors Link, which had a mission to assist in the healthy integration of immigrants into the US. Additionally, another organization I was involved with was the International Youth Organization, which focused on improving the life skills of young people.

All in all, I am a proud Turkish leader who has ultimately become a global citizen. I take pride in being able to harmonize the values of my Turkish upbringing and American education. I have seen the positives of this combination in my global leadership journey, and still see it today in the United States. As long as we know our personal values, respect other cultures, adapt to new settings, occasions, and opportunities with our authentic style, I believe we can be successful and have purpose in life.