

November 2015 Issue MARTIN GLOBAL LEADERS

# Global Insider Interviews

Conversations with leaders around the globe

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Hi <<First Name>>,

This month's *Global Insider Interview* is with **Stefan Rotter**, Global Marketing Director, Ultrason BASF, in Shanghai.

Stefan offers valuable suggestions for career management and fully "seizing the day" to learn and grow richly from new opportunities. From having been stationed in Germany, USA, Taiwan and China, Stefan also impresses us with his deep understanding of leading across cultures. He points out key aspects of effective communication and management styles in different regions, and how to put this to use as a leader based anywhere.

Stefan was interviewed by David Howells, EMEA Region Head, from our London office.

We hope you find this useful for your own leadership. As always we welcome your views and your suggestions for future interviews.

Sincerely, Craig & David  
MARTIN GLOBAL LEADERS





## Stefan Rotter on "Carpe Diem" - seizing the day in a global career

*"We should all seize the opportunities  
we are given rather than waiting for  
perfectly planned career steps..."*

*Stefan Rotter, Global Marketing*

*Head, Ultrason BASF, Shanghai.*



### **David Howells: Who were some of your role models growing up?**

**Stefan Rotter:** My father was a wartime refugee living in what is now Eastern Bohemia. In those days you had to be very determined to get on, and he taught me the importance of hard work and the way we all have to strive in order to achieve what we want for ourselves and our families.

My older sister was also at that time a politically active person who demonstrated a high degree of personal drive. Maybe it was this combination of people among my family who instilled in me the idea of wanting to do something different, so I decided to go and study Economics and Business Administration.

### **What cultural values did you learn growing up to which you would attribute some of your success?**

Certainly the need to work hard is something that's important to me, but I am also driven by the need to take responsibility for myself and others. Of course alongside work, I believe it's also essential to actively demonstrate that you are straightforward and honest with people.

Interestingly, I also have a strong curiosity about how people in different places live their lives. I am fascinated to see and understand how people achieve their dreams and beliefs. I consider my Christian faith is also important in providing me with guidance and strength.

### **How has your leadership style evolved while working across a range of cultures?**

I was keen to get my first international assignment which involved me running a project in New Jersey. It was a coordination role, with a key responsibility of keeping the folks back in Germany up to date with what our US subsidiary was up to and coordinate between the regions. The culture there was quite different and I had to ensure that I was not seen as the "headquarters spy." I quickly learnt how things were done in the USA and the relative directness of the leadership culture there.

My second overseas assignment took us by surprise with an ominous late Friday afternoon call from my manager's boss asking me whether I'd be interested in quickly taking on a leadership role this time to Taiwan. I was announced with a great fanfare of trumpets as Sales Director to the office in Taipei, but I was taking up a role that had previously been held by a relatively strong local, so I had to tread very carefully as a new foreign leader.

I decided to gain acceptance by giving the locals a lot more autonomy than they had previously experienced. I found that one of the ways to add value as a leader was to "buffer" issues between HQ and the locals, so that they were given the freedom to get on with delivering results - rather than having to deal with bureaucratic headquarters issues.

### **How have you had to deal with differences between national cultures?**

The key factor in dealing with cultural differences is developing your ability to "read" people who have different mind-sets from your own. Misunderstandings are the key frustrations which can go on for a long time and seriously affect your ability to get things done.

It's important for the "foreign" leader to make suitable adaptations to their style in order to achieve the desired result. It's often a mistake to expect that your local people will adapt to you and your preferred leadership style. On the other hand, when working in Shanghai and Taipei I did not sense anyone expected me to fully immerse into their culture.

Two things I found out quickly were the importance of ensuring that no-one "lost face" and secondly that "truth" is a relative concept in some parts of the world. I found that imposing myself on others at meetings was not a good tactic and that humility was much more effective.

I also discovered that locals don't readily "open up" and it's necessary for the leaders to do so first. By having meals and social time with my new team that we gradually started to develop a better understanding of each other and this helped me considerably. Experiencing foreign cuisine was also one of the great joys of many of my overseas postings.

Another aspect that I found different to my own culture was the issue of "redundancy". In Germany we are relatively clear and economical with what we say - if we think something

is important we simply say so and expect this to be understood by the receiver. In Asia I found that “redundancy” is accepted and even necessary – if you want something to be seen as important you need to repeat it frequently so that it really does register as important in the minds of the locals.

Similarly, in the U.S. a variety of communication channels and reminders are applied to create attention where I as a German would have cut it short. While the underlying hierarchical structure or “chain of command” is seen and executed stronger outside Europe, the need to get every team member and especially your peers on the same level involved and informed in advance of major decisions is a prerequisite for mutual buy-in, achieving consensus, and preventing back-stabbing tactics later on.

### **What advice do you have for leaders transitioning for the first time into international or global roles?**

The first piece of advice is always to manage your own expectations of the promises that you are given about the support and resources that will be available or provided to you. Experience teaches us that expectations and reality are rarely the same, so be emotionally and physically well prepared for the challenges that you might face. The first year is always the critical period - professionally and privately; you simply cannot rush it.

Secondly, in my view it's also important to consider international assignments to be a minimum of 3 to 4 years in duration and a long term opportunity. If assignments are less than that the leader tends not to get sufficiently involved and the people whom he leads similarly recognize that he is only a “temporary” person posted in from headquarters and will manage around him. As a result, he will miss making a meaningful impact.

Thirdly, whilst these international transitions are very busy and intense, I think it's important to remember that they can and should be “fun” and never considered a big “sacrifice.” They are great learning opportunities for both leaders and the families that sometimes accompany them. In retrospect all my international moves have challenged me but also had a significant “fun factor.”

### **Looking out 3-7 years, what challenges do you expect global leaders will face?**

Information overload appears to be one of the most significant challenges that global leaders will continue to face and possibly to an even greater degree in the future. With heavy travel commitments it's really difficult to find private time to regroup and get control over one's thoughts and agenda.

Working internationally also means that you get calls and emails at all times of the day and night, and there is always that temptation to get on with answering them rather than taking some time to rest. It's essential to work out what's important and what's urgent, because they are not the same. Working overseas reinforces the need for leaders to know what is important for them, their people and their organizations.

### **What has been your darkest hour and what steered you through this?**

A tough time for me was when shortly after I arrived in Taiwan I found myself in the midst of a major and unexpected organizational change. The role that I had expected to do was virtually now non-existent and I had to face a great period of uncertainty. Rather than return home to Germany with my young family not having arrived yet in Taipei, I decided to stick it out. My Christian beliefs helped me to understand that there is always a plan for you and that it's sometimes necessary to trust that the situation will work itself out and all be part of

life's rich experiences.

My lessons learned during these "dark hours and months" is that even when circumstances seem to put the brakes on your career path, holding on and going through the experiences and still managing many changes somehow qualifies you for new future challenges abroad. You earn a certain reputation, which means that you are entrusted for assignments which would typically be reserved for the younger high-career potential pools of the corporation. Now, after further assignments for regional responsibilities to Central Eastern Europe and to North America, I can use all my experience to manage globally a successful product line out of Shanghai.

The expression "carpe diem" is something I'm very aware of - to me it means "live your day where you find yourself." I subscribe to the idea that we should all seize the opportunities that we are given rather than waiting for perfectly-planned career steps.

**THANK YOU, STEFAN. WE REALLY APPRECIATE YOU SHARING YOUR INSIGHTS WITH OUR GLOBAL INSIDER COMMUNITY.**

To find out more about our **Global Insider Interviews**, or to discover the details of our **Global Accelerator** program for global leaders, please contact Craig Martin ([craig@martingloballeaders.com](mailto:craig@martingloballeaders.com)) or David Howells ([david@martingloballeaders.com](mailto:david@martingloballeaders.com)). We would be pleased to speak with you.



*Note to Readers: Our interviews with global leaders, as part of our Global Insiders series, offer personal insights from widely experienced people on the issues that have impacted them, do not necessarily represent the views and positions of neither their current organization nor those in which they have worked.*

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*Each month, Martin Global Leaders interviews top executives from diverse backgrounds across industries and regions to illuminate how culture informs leadership philosophy and practices in today's global business environment.*



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