

Dan Bulucea: On Leadership and Innovation In VUCA Environments



Foto: Sorin Stana

Radu Manolescu: How does it feel to be part of Google Romania?

Dan Bulucea: It's a privilege to work for Google. It's a powerful company in UK or US, but in a small country like ours it's an even more important company. You have the opportunity to change, really change the context of every issue, to put a "dent in the universe". We talk about what's it like to use technology, what's it good for in a company, this whole technological progress. In a way, our whole culture and identity, our traditions and national heritage becomes more visible through technology.

Our educational system can be improved by using interactive tools - free to use - for any student.

I believe that trying to achieve these things, through technology, for your country is a huge yet humbling opportunity.

Google started with you, right?

Yes, I had the opportunity to open this office, here. Google is the kind of company that doesn't tell you what to do or how to do it; you don't get a manual. So it's an adventure as long as you like being part of a fluid environment that is getting built by you and your colleagues. It's a chance.

Of course, we had a starting point: how to create a team, establish business objectives, growth objectives, looking at what are your assets, how you can integrate and define a strategy that makes sense for your market. All these things that are valuable for any company, also apply to Google.

How does Google see or deal with ambiguity?

There is so much talk these days about VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) environments, about how it is to navigate among things that aren't well defined. Technology is often blamed for changing behaviors, changing business models....We don't necessarily have a model, we don't know where we're heading or how

even the future smartphone will look like * or how we will communicate in the future. We choose to define these things rather than get stuck in indecision.

What is the leadership like at Google? What's the benchmark that you take in this world? How do you define if you did a great job? Maybe just doubling your business is a poor performance because the business had a much greater potential, only you didn't know it.

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In this world is essential how you work with you team and this brings us to the leadership issue. I believe that my role is to create "space" around my colleagues. If you hire people who believe in what they do, who are passionate about the role, who see that role as the best place to be in their personal and professional development path, you don't have a performance management issue anymore. This whole concept is turned upside down because the benchmark comes from the employee himself. He/She's so passionate about what he/she does that he/she'll establish much higher objectives than you'd ever think to set for him/her.

So our role as leaders turns into facilitators, firstly - to ease their path to do the job and secondly, to create enough space for people's development. What I've seen is that such persons are driven by learning, by their own development rather than by external incentives or benchmarks.

Besides this passion for the role, how much did you feel that people identify with Google's mission? How much are they driven by this purpose?

There are several dimensions here. Firstly, I believe we are spoiled because Google is a very powerful brand, that attracts, which has a reputation of a cool place to work for ...all these give you more than just the energy to do things, these give you space for being creative, to innovate constantly.

Secondly, establishing very high objectives, like changing the world or solving major humanity problems, usually attracts very good people, very smart, that really shine at Google. As a result, this environment needs to give them the feeling that they can grow there, that they matter and could make a difference rather than anybody watching their performance scores.

Yet, defining objectives is equally important. Our mission is very clear - "organizing world's information and making it accessible to everyone". Still this mission is very generous with numerous aspects to it - some of them apparently without any connection: we talk about easy access to information, about digitization, about hot air balloons spreading internet from up in the air, about self-driving cars and green energy...many directions. What connects them, the red thread, is that all of these are meant to solve big humanity issues. And the fact that our people are very good, allows them to jump from one direction to the next, to develop in several directions at once.

How do you innovate?

We have 3 major principles:

First one - is absolutely essential to know your user. We don't start with a good idea and then seek somebody who needs it, but the other way around. We start with a big issue and then we use technology to solve it. Small yet essential difference - it's about applied innovation. Otherwise there is no point because you don't have a

purpose and you waste effort. Then, it's necessary you get fast and accurate user feedback.

The second principle is called "Think 10X" (aim very very high, apparently beyond any reasonable limit). It's about freeing your mind from any limitations, anything that tells you this is not possible or that things should be done in a certain way. There are voices saying our educational system shapes our minds by making us believe there is a single correct answer - we take single-answer questions assessments....when in fact the answers could be many and diversified. By imposing from the start to aim for 10X more benefits to a solution, obliges you to start from scratch. For example, if we aim to decrease the fuel consumption by 10%, we come up with an engine fine-tuning. But if you want to decrease it by 90% you have to build an entirely different engine.

And the third component is Prototyping. This means having a beginners' mind - not assuming you'll come out with the perfect answer but rather trying alternatives. Do not invest too much in a single direction and then discover that you've wasted time and effort. Start small and often and you have many more chances to succeed. Also, this gives you the opportunity to progress very fast and adjust much better to user needs.

Another thing that differentiates us on the subject is that we don't consider that only certain people have a monopoly on innovation by virtue of their position. You have to let innovation flow through the entire organisation, to encourage everyone to come up with ideas. And, most importantly, this encouragement comes from accepting failure, from not punishing it. If something didn't work out, you didn't lose, you just learned one way not to go. Maybe paradoxically, you win. This a major cultural difference - between European culture and the American one - in our culture, a person failed; in the US culture, that idea failed. And the person who tried, won because he now has a richer experience. In our European culture, failure sticks to us for a long time. We try not to do that at Google.

*referring to the Google smartphone project [Ara](#)

Leadership Talks

This the first interview of a series of talks with great leaders, with strong moral values, on life, leadership, education and technology. We are very happy to interview Dan who has built the first Google office in Romania.