

Okan Isikci: A Leader should always Remember that above all He is Leading “People” not Products

“Never stop learning and improving yourself” is the advice that Mr Isikci gives to professionals in the pharmaceutical industry. An industry that is, according to him, still traditional in its methods and needs to shift to more innovative solutions in order to satisfy the needs of the customers and improve patients’ healthcare around the world.

What are the qualities that you think could make from a person a successful leader?

A leader should always remember that above all he is leading “people”, not products, not business transactions nor finances. If a leader remembers that his core asset is his people, he would never fail.

Can you name a person who has had a tremendous impact on you as a leader? Maybe someone who has been a mentor to you? Why and how did this person impact your life?

My father. I have learned how to keep to your principles, always treat people with integrity and never compromise on ethics and what you know to be right.

What is one mistake you witness leaders making more frequently than others?

Getting arrogant, trying to be the decision maker on everything, stopping to listen to their people.

Your colleagues at MSD speak of your exceptional leadership skills, what advice would you give to people who aim at achieving what you achieved so far?

Always be a student. Never stop learning and improving yourself.

How do you maintain your and your team’s daily motivation and inspiration despite obstacles, pushback or setbacks?

I think when they see me inspired, motivated, energized and with optimism day in day out, they get energized as well. I also encourage my team to try new things and that it is OK to make mistakes on the way. The worry of failure



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getting out of the picture, gets people to be more motivated to do better and better. Also frequent appreciation of the small things and psychological empowerment is very important.

If you have to change something in your life what would be?

I am very happy where life brought me, but I probably would like to create more time for myself. It is important for all of us to have some “jut me” time.

How can you compare the pharmaceutical industry in the Levant to other countries where you worked before?

Business dynamics can vary from country to country but more or less the fundamentals are the same but there is one major difference between Levant and maybe the US or Europe, and that is around the human factor of building

relationships. It is so refreshing to see that long standing business or personal relationships matter here. Even if it is for business, they are so much personal in nature and stronger. I think the business reflects the genuine nature of the Levant.

What has working in the Levant region added to your professional and personal experience?

Levant is this very unique place, made up of countries with very diverse cultural, political and business environments. There is never a one-size fits all strategy here. Each country has their unique challenges and their opportunities. You always have to be ready with contingency plans and always expect the unexpected. It can really sharpen your skills in agile decision making and adapting quickly to situations. MSD is one of the biggest companies that invest in hospital and acute care, what is our vision for the future in the acute care as we are seeing other companies trying to avoid this therapeutic area.

There are still significant unmet medical needs in this area to improve patient outcomes. MSD will continue to invest because we believe that we can continue to have a meaningful contribution to patient healthcare, especially in areas like the Levant where there are high number of hospital interventions. This is the true difference of MSD.

In the new Levant structure, an innovation manager has been appointed; why is innovation important in MSD and how do you encourage innovative solutions?

I think pharmaceutical industry was left behind during the digital revolution. While patients and healthcare professionals are now using very different interfaces, companies continue to engage in the traditional methods. The innovation lead will be responsible for finding new solutions for our customers that will meet their needs.

How would you describe the corporate culture in Levant?

Very friendly and warm. A lot of relationships that extend to the personal life which brings more color to the office life. I see a very youthful workforce who is ambitious and energetic.

How can you compare the Lebanese market to other markets in the Levant region like Jordan, Iraq and Iran?

Lebanese market is very unique and very well established. We have many of our doctors who are trained at world standards and many of them are regarded as key scientific leaders within our region. We have really very prestigious

academic institutions as well as hospitals in this country. We also have a very capable and talented work force in Lebanon. This deep business acumen is almost engraved in the DNA of the Lebanese people. This is why many pharma companies’ regional offices are in Lebanon and more and more it is becoming a regional hub.

How will the continuous repricing affect the life span of products and eventually the financial power of big companies to invest in new innovative drugs?

As innovative Pharma we welcome initiatives that provide better access to patients. We support the appropriate use and pricing of genericized products that ultimately free up funds that can allow the entry of new innovative products that offer meaningful benefits to healthcare. The best working healthcare system have first a long term healthcare agenda, then relevant pricing, funding, procurement, regulatory and other procedures that are set to support and achieve this agenda. Just pricing regulations by itself don’t achieve too much in the absence of a well-established healthcare agenda and objectives. It should support what the country wants to achieve in patient care and outcomes. Not well thought repricing mechanisms, can make the planning cycle very confusing and long-term investments potentially look not as attractive.

Tell us about your view of the future of the pharmaceutical industry.

I think we are already living a shift towards biological and large molecules in the innovations that are coming through. I think oncology will be a central topic which companies will continue to focus on trying to improve the healthcare for patients with cancer. In that respect, I expect partnerships between small research companies and larger pharmaceutical companies to expedite the research and availability of these new medicines. I think as MSD we are well positioned with our future pipeline and our partnerships in this field and we are poised to be one of the leading companies.

From a different perspective, I expect stronger long term partnerships between pharmaceutical companies and the governments where there will be more discussions around value based and risk sharing type agreements.

The world has changed more in the last 10 years than it did 50 years preceding that. Pharmaceutical industry is of will be a part of this change. It will be exciting times, as we will try to find solutions and cures for many diseases and conditions and improve healthcare of patients around the world.