

Interview

One Planet Leaders, an interview with WWF International and IMD

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ABSTRACT Sue Mizera interviews Carolina Moeller (Head of Business Education, WWF International) and Michael Yaziji (Professor of Strategy and Management, IMD) concerning their partnership on the *One Planet Leaders* program that aims to put sustainability at the heart of business practices.

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Sue Mizera (SM): May we start with a little background about One Planet Leaders: your goals, vision and the ideal impact of the partnership?

Carolina Moeller (CM): *One Planet Leaders* grew from corporate engagement work between WWF and one of our partners. We were working together on something called Environmentally Sustainable Business. Essentially, this was about identifying ways of making sustainability work by reducing the company's footprint and creating business value at the same time. The company was so pleased with the outcome, they decided to put forward funding to help WWF set up an open enrollment education program, serving as a platform for engaging with more companies on these important topics.

The initial work on Environmentally Sustainable Business began in 2004, and the first *One Planet Leaders* pilot was launched in 2007. I joined the program one year later. It quickly became clear to us that the issues we are dealing with on the program are in fact classic business topics – such as

strategy, operations and communication – with sustainability at the heart of them. With this realization, we started to look for the ideal partner – the best in teaching executives – a leading business school.

SM: What did you look for in your partner?

CM: To us, the brand fit was really important. It needed to be a brand that could sit comfortably next to the Panda. In other words, a brand that has the right values, characteristics and tone of voice. Secondly, the partner needed to have the right level of ambition in terms of moving sustainability to the core of business. For example, we wanted *One Planet Leaders* to sit in the business division of the school vs being peripheral. Our goal is for our partner to have a one-planet mindset integrated into all of their offerings, since ultimately this is the context in which business operates. We only have one planet and this requires a new way of doing business compared to the old linear approach. Finally, the personality fit was very important to

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us. Delivering a program like *One Planet Leaders* means working very closely, sharing personal values, dreams and motivations. So a good team fit is absolutely key.

We were in discussions with a number of different schools, and in the end IMD felt like the optimal fit. In addition to the criteria already mentioned, IMD has the advantage of being just down the road from us, which is another great benefit. After early discussions in 2009, we finally launched our first joint program in 2011, with the aim of developing the best change-makers in the world.

Michael Yaziji (MY): In sustainability.

CM: In sustainability, yes. And sustainability – as we mentioned – means business. By coming together as two institutions, we can offer a credible, highly attractive and unique program. WWF brings the reason to believe in sustainability, and IMD brings the reason to believe in business.

MY: It's nice to reflect on this. In 2004, I published an article in the HBR (*Turning Gadflies into Allies*) on the issue of partnerships. I haven't thought about this from an academic point of view in quite a while. It's kind of fun. What's interesting when you hear Carolina speak, there is a difference how we came to this partnership. So this was a strategic plan on WWF's part, trying to identify a business school as a partner, but from IMD's side, it didn't start that way. I have been a fan of WWF for a long time and I care about the issue of sustainability. I was anxious to do work in this area. From an academic point of view, sometimes we talk about projects needing champions. I wanted to do this, I thought this was a great opportunity, I thought it was a great fit, I thought Carolina was great and I thought it would eventually pay off for IMD. So from the IMD side, it started off as an unexpected opportunity, to be

evaluated, to be rethought, but it began as an opportunity that presented itself that could be a strategic path to pursue.

SM: It's interesting, that one side was strategic and seeking a specific kind of partner and the other was 'ok, let's give it a try, that's something we wanted to do, it could be a terrific opportunity and let's see how it goes'.

MY: I don't want to paint this incorrectly. WWF has a unique brand and could choose between great schools. They weren't coming to IMD saying, will you be our partner? They were looking at a number of institutions; they were talking about this need and were trying to find the best fit.

CM: I think this is an important point because the interest from other business schools gave us confidence that we were on the right track. It wasn't just IMD that was interested in what we were trying to achieve, but others were lining up as well. And that made us feel confident. As always, when you have a choice, you feel good! You can pick the best fit. Undoubtedly, we were very lucky to have Michael, because he could take on the role and champion the idea inside of IMD, and quite literally make it happen.

SM: So WWF was looking to marry its expertise in sustainability with a partner – in this case IMD – whose expertise was business, realizing that sustainability is, in fact, business.

CM: Yes. To have a shared understanding of this is very important. And overall, to share values and have a common ground – and this is what the team has. We see the urgency, we see that the current system is not working; we see the opportunity of influencing through education and awakening managers and executives to the

amazing opportunity that is out there, not only to do good business-wise, but also to do good personally, and to feel good about their jobs. That's the vision: to awaken the spirit in all business leaders and the longing to actually make a difference, which we can – each one of us. Some of us are in positions with multiplying effects. Those are the people we want to reach.

And of course with IMD, we are able to raise our game and attract even more senior business leaders. This is indeed important when it comes to driving the kind of change we're talking about.

SM: Can you give a little background about how *One Planet Leaders* works? As you said, 2011 was the first joint launch. If you're showing up in a course of 'OPLs', what do you get? What are you expected to do?

MY: I think over the course of the partnership we really did refine what the core of the program is, and as mentioned, it's to develop the world's best change-makers in sustainability. As such, it's about change agency and continued sustainability. So we already knew that we had two tracks; that the people had to walk out of the program being competent in core areas around sustainability issues AND they had to be excellent at change agency. Those are the two topic areas that we really focus on in the program.

In addition, the environmental challenge ahead is so great that we can't wait for projects to move forward inside companies. Therefore, one of the criteria that we use in selecting participants is that they already have an on-going change project in sustainability in their company. And we work with them prior to the first module, over the module, after the module, on their change projects. In other words, we want to impact them not only in terms of their learning but as well in their immediate business impact.

And then the third angle is one of the things I have seen a lot in teaching

executives: after you change an executive, when they go back to their own institution, nothing is changed. They revert to type. Everything reverts to type. So another principle that we brought to the program is the 'ambassador principle', which means thinking of the participant not as a target but as an ambassador to our target group. Our target is really their home team. So they work with their home team prior to the program, identifying their business challenges, their leadership challenges and the organization challenges that they want to work through. And we bring their home team along throughout the journey – virtually – so the participants have a critical mass moving forward with their organization over the course of the program. So when the course finishes, there is some real momentum there.

SM: It's very interesting that you have foreseen, beyond the content of the training, managing the process once participants return home. It's very exciting actually to hear about this. Carolina, anything to add to that?

CM: As Michael said, there are the two key pillars: sustainability and change management. When it comes to sustainability – what do we mean? Well, we are not focusing on the technical aspects of the issues, for example, we do not help participants develop a Life Cycle Assessment or a CSR strategy. Other programs do that. On *One Planet Leaders*, we address questions like – What does a sustainable company look like? What are the new business models that are needed? How do we get there? Here we use ideas such as biomimicry, cradle to cradle, industrial ecology, shifting from selling a product to selling a service and so on.

In terms of change management, we explore the process for driving change – the levers, the barriers, organizational

culture and so forth. But in order to be that change-maker, to play with these different assets, you need to be confident in yourself as a leader. This adds a third pillar to what we do: Personal leadership, which is about developing not only the motivation for change, but also the confidence and the skills to lead this change. We work with different tools to do this, for example, storytelling, narrative leadership, simulation games etc. So we're really trying to help the participants advance themselves as leaders.

SM: How long is the program? How long is the course?

CM: It's a 4-day on-site module, but we also have an extended virtual learning journey, which starts 4 weeks before the module and lasts 4 weeks after the module. That's what Michael referred to; we start working with the participants by aligning them upfront, taking them through the module and helping them implement their change projects afterwards.

After the 8-week long learning journey, participants join two sets of alumni and learning networks: the IMD network in general, which of course is a great group to be part of, and secondly, the specific *One Planet Leaders* group. This is indeed an important tool to keep the participants feeling connected, because as much as we try to prepare them for the challenge that is ahead, when they get back to their companies, at times they will feel isolated. This network is there to give them support, inject new learning and to keep inspiring them over time.

SM: Can you explain a little about roles and responsibilities within your partnership, WWF and IMD?

CM: This is a joint program. This is WWF and IMD, which means it should feel

seamless. When they come on board, it's Michael and myself and we're running the program. And sure there will be areas where IMD, as an institution, and WWF as an institution, have different points of view, this is normal. We try to have healthy debates, but it's very important that we have a foundation that we stand on together and that's our program.

And we were delighted to see – already after the first run – that we got very positive feedback from participants around our way of collaborating together.

SM: When you started out, were there any partnership role models that inspired you? Or were you inventing from a blank sheet of paper?

MY: It is interesting to reflect on this question. There were lots of partnerships that I looked at when I was doing my research for my HBR paper in 2004. And some of them were cross-sectoral partnerships, so I looked at those and I looked at my learnings, trying to figure out what are some of the roadblocks and hurdles we could face. WWF was in some of the partnerships I had studied myself. So they had done partnerships around brand stewardship and forestry partnerships with industry players. So I had some ideas there, I talked to a lot of people who worked in those partnerships. IMD had also had partnerships with other business schools. And that was a reference point as we evaluated our partnership in trying to figure out the appropriate governance structure. We referenced that as we referenced prior experiences. What's interesting is that, in some ways, this is unique. We referenced other partnerships that we had at IMD, but everything works differently here. In part because WWF wasn't an academic institution; their approach, their concerns were different from another academic institution. So it's a little bit *ad hoc*.

CM: I agree completely that while we had experience in other partnerships, this was a whole new kind of partnership. And I think – for me personally – I relied a lot on Michael’s expertise and on my Director’s expertise who had been involved in developing partnerships before. We entered with a couple of principles in mind and one that was really important for us all was the idea of an equal partnership – we share the responsibility and therefore we share the cost, the risk and we share the profit, however modest that is.

MY: What struck me the most as we went through the process – that I didn’t really feel when I was studying it academically – was how important it was to have champions in both organizations that really cared about it and that really wanted to press it forward in their own organizations. Every organization has its resource constraints, every organization has its attention constraints and Carolina and I had to do battle – I think – to make sure that this actually happened. Because both organizations could very well have spent their time and money elsewhere. So, in our interpersonal relationship, the energy from the champions is – I think – more critical to success than I had the impression before.

CM: When we work with training our change-makers, we talk about really understanding what the agenda is, ie, what is truly on the mind of the people that you’re trying to convince – finding this out and identifying ways of overcoming barriers – were really key to making the process flow and be what we hoped for.

SM: What you suggest is that you’ve been engaged in a classic selling process internally?

CM: Absolutely. Once we had decided ‘Yes, we’re going with a partnership’ at

the highest level, everything fell into place. I remember the first project meeting at IMD, walking into a room with 10 people, all eager to help and wondering how they best could contribute – this was a totally new experience, coming from a team of 2.6 FTEs (full-time equivalent employees). It is wonderful to be supported by a team of experts knowing how to communicate, how to market, how to recruit for education, how to run logistics and overall cater for optimal learning. This was really fabulous to find and tap into at IMD.

SM: Did you formalize this in a charter, writing down roles and responsibilities? Is there a document that exists, that is a kind of ‘bible’ ... I see smiles. I was just wondering if you took it to that level?

CM: We did write up the partnership overview. I wouldn’t call it a charter, but we did so with the idea of – Why are we interested? Why are you interested? How do we want to run this?

MY: It was a pain in the butt. But I think it was very important that we went through this, even if it was painful, because there were issues that had to be resolved. And if we had glossed over it, it would have come up eventually. So I was very frustrated. We didn’t create a huge document, we created a two pager.

SM: That’s fine.

MY: It was for 9 months to a year, it is fully approved by both organizations. So I think it indicates how important it is to identify all the potential issues upfront.

CM: It’s funny, I haven’t looked at that document ever since.

Laughs

MY: Writing down our plan was one key success factor. Another one that is well

documented is top-level buy-in. Carolina and I worked from the middle of the organizations trying to ensure that the heads of the two organizations met. They met and shook hands, creating official buy-in and we had more organizational support from that point forward and that was cemented through the document.

SM: Any other keys to success?

MY: We're talking about cross-sectoral partnerships. What's unique about them? I think a lot of it has to do with ideologies and value-sets and organizational systems. And NGOs are not like corporations and they're not like business schools. Business schools are not like NGOs. And – it's kind of remarkable – both sides come in with real assumptions and stereotypes about the other sector. And, interestingly, some of those stereotypes are absolutely true.

CM: You people are really nice.

Laughs

MY: And some of them are less true than what we need them to be or what we think they are. And that's a hurdle. That really is a hurdle. It reduces trust, it reduces identification; your partners are more like an 'other' than a 'we'. And that's something you have to battle all the time. I think, again, that the interpersonal relationship between the two champions is really important.

What I felt myself, I have always considered myself as a bit of a 'hippy flippy' kind of person. But Carolina sees me as a business school professor. And so her assumptions about me are that I am this money-grubbing business school kind of guy without a soul, right? And I see her as – I know WWF a little bit more and I know she has a P&G background – so we can't put her in this much of a 'hippy flippy' pigeon-hole as I'd

like to. So even between us, I see this playing out. We have to remind ourselves how much we share in terms of our vision and our goals; that's at the fundamental level. So I think that's a little bit unique to these cross-sectoral partnerships. And the organizations do work differently.

SM: Can you elaborate a little bit more on how the organizations work differently?

MY: We do tend to attack things, problems and challenges a little bit as a stereotypical business would: 'What's the problem?' 'What's the bottom line?' 'Let's crack it.' A little bit quick decision making, I think. I think WWF is a little bit slower; it's a little bit more methodical, a little bit more consensus-based. My sense is that the organization is a little less hierarchical perhaps in some ways. Decisions are slower because everybody needs to buy-in more fully and more people are engaged in decisions than in IMD, I think.

CM: For sure, the organizational cultures are very different. Whereas education is obviously at the heart of IMD, it is not necessarily seen as core in WWF and so at times we struggle to get cut-through. However, this is rapidly changing, because of our partnership with IMD and the other great work we are doing. There is certainly an increased interest in our work, both internally and externally. So that's one cultural difference here, the priorities are different. We are small but getting bigger. Equally, business education focused on changing the role of business is a new, emerging area within IMD.

MY: So another thing is around doing anything different from the norm. We do executive education programs; that's our bread and butter, that's all we do. So one of the things we have seen is that this gets dropped into the bucket of programs and

gets processed along with all the others. And I think that can create a tension with WWF because they have a vision for how they want this to be. *One Planet Leaders* is not like other programs. So there is a struggle between the vision of how the team want things to run and the IMD's process machine.

CM: Having said that, we do enjoy high degrees of flexibility, not least when it comes to the brand. We are encouraged to keep the unique OPL brand identity, and we do not need to adapt the brand to the look and feel of IMD, which is great. We all agree it's an advantage for us to look and be different.

SM: So you're a sub-brand in a way? You're your own brand within it?

CM: I guess you could say that. While there is a push to be consistent and to follow certain standards and procedures and conform with the norms of education, as Michael says, there is still room for allowing the brand to be different, saying 'this is different from the rest of what IMD is doing, so let's be proud of that and celebrate that'.

Coming back to the support team of experts – what I really like there is how often they say how important this is to IMD and the fact that *One Planet Leaders* matters: 'we want to make it success'. You really feel that you walk in to a group of friends. Sometimes maybe they're frustrated because of typical project challenges, but there is a real sense of 'we'.

SM: Communicating: I get the feeling that there is a lot of this between the two of you in particular. What is the role of communication in your work?

MY: I have nothing to say about communications.

Laughs

CM: What we do is communication and tracking. We track the outcomes – that we filled the seats on the program and that the people like what they come to get. And this we communicate. We have no joint document, which is signed by me and Michael that goes out. Michael handles it on his end and I handle it on mine. So I will give updates – let's say every quarter – to my management; how things are going. It's managed separately. We get the results from what we do together and then we communicate this in different ways.

SM: Michael, I am sure you do have something to say about communications: anything to add to that?

MY: No, honestly I don't. I think the strong communication between the two of us is the most important thing.

SM: In all relationships, some things work better than others. Are there areas that you look at and want to make better? Anything you are targeting to make a better success?

CM: We are constantly striving for improvement. Because what we want to do – deliver the best program to develop the best change-makers – is a really fast moving space. I think, what's great is that we can challenge each other on where the program should go. I must say that every time we run the program I am the most excited I have ever been. (Laughs) We figure out new ways to look at and to deal with the questions that we have.

MY: I'm delighted to do this interview because it's making me think. When you asked the question, Sue, I was thinking it was a process question – What do we need to do in terms of our process? – and I thought 'Geez! Not that much!' And

Carolina is absolutely right that we are constantly striving to improve the product. And for me, that is a sign that we're doing very, very well, that the process is running sufficiently well that we really can focus entirely on improving what we deliver to our clients. That's very important.

SM: With all the process stuff behind you, it must be almost liberating to be able to concentrate on what is in the package?

MY and CM: Absolutely.

SM: For those just starting up a partnership, what advice would you offer to ensure their success?

CM: I have got two that we can start with. For me, it's something about shared ambitions. So you really have a common idea of where you want to go. And the second one is that you have shared-values, shared-liking, that you actually enjoy being with that person. And of course, a partnership over time changes, so it's important that it's not just from a one-to-one relationship, but also from an organizational personality that it matches up. But this is not to underestimate the importance of whether you actually like the person or not. And number three, Michael?

MY: I think there are so many necessary conditions. If there wasn't enough win-win at base, if there wasn't enough interpersonal connection, enough energy, enough organizational flexibility on both sides to allow this to happen, it wouldn't work. Frankly, it's difficult to answer your question because I don't know if there are one or two key ingredients.

CM: Maybe what I would add is this – be clear about what each of you brings, what you take and how much you are able to put in. So something around shared expectations.

SM: Any specific advances that you're looking at making for the next wave?

CM: One of the themes that we are working with is to make the program ever more experiential. So the changing notion of learning – that it is not just me or Michael at the front saying, this is what you need to know – but rather we are providing them with a context and allowing them to learn. Another one is increasingly using nature as a classroom. If we are talking about nature, why not experience and learn in/with/from nature? We'll see how we do it, but we have a day planned in the Jura as a way of experimenting with this. And then, what we hope is that by making these adaptations to the program, we can make this life changing, inspiring the participants to do great things when they come back into the business. It is our hope, that when participants finish the program, they tell at least 10 people to come onto this program; that this is the place to go! That it becomes the best program IMD has ever offered.

MY: I just would like to underline Carolina's point. I do a lot of work in change management and I think one of the things that has become ever clearer to me is the importance of energy in change management. You only get change in organizations when there is sufficient energy behind it. That energy is often an emotional energy. It's not simply about theoretical bottom line impact; it's much more about people being energized to really sell a project internally, inside their organization. So I think this deeper focus on experiential learning – really touching people's hearts – is important. It's not soft stuff; it's actually what drives change in organizations.

CM: It's about opening the heart, stimulating and stretching the mind, and only then, deeply inspiring action for a truly sustainable world.

MY: Wow, you sound like a hippy flippy.

Laughs

SM: Is it fair to say that the success of your product, *One Planet Leaders* is a direct result of your successful partnership?

MY: Absolutely. I have one thing to add, just to underscore the importance of your overall project, Sue. One of the trends that I see from a pure strategy perspective is that a lot of the big opportunities in the future are going to be around creating new business models, not just for a company but for an entire industry value chain, to create entire new industries. And some of the biggest opportunities there, I believe, are going to involve cross-sectoral partnerships. So I think some of the winning firms in the future are really going to be those that develop competencies in this area. There are a lot of opportunities that can only be met through these kinds of partnerships. So I think the topic that you're studying – and I began working on this in 2004 – is much more relevant today than it was at that time. So, good for you.

CM: Absolutely. We have talked about this continuous striving to make things better, to make the program better. And I think another one is around making the partnership bigger. So to look at it: ok, today we deliver *One Planet Leaders* together, that's this one executive open enrollment program, but what else could we do? I think that's really exciting too; to say 'if we want to break in to the DNA of IMD, what does that mean?' Or if they want to be involved in more of what we do, in our partnerships, what does that mean? To have organic growth – which you grow from a strong core – is an exciting position to be in.

SM: You put me in mind of what I believe about brands. I truly believe that a brand has an essence, a DNA, a life. It is a living,

breathing thing and it is made up of things like vision and mission and values and promises, all entirely intangible, but all irrefutably powerful. So, before, Michael, you referred to 'touching people's hearts' as 'soft': it's not soft, it's fire.

CM: Absolutely. And a brand is owned by customers. Eventually, as this expands and we have a stronger and stronger alumni, *One Planet Leaders* will grow by the people we have touched. And in turn they will continue to touch others. We were once given the challenge from our management to reach a million people. Now we are talking about reaching hundreds of millions.

As the world's challenges are getting bigger, we need to have a bigger impact – and of course we are no longer 2.6 FTEs, we are a few more, and we are actually recruiting next week, which is great – but the point is that, alone we are still incapable of training even a thousand people. So we need to touch people so deeply that they in turn train another 10 or another 50 and then you have the ripple effect. So that's the real guiding approach for us, I would say. That's how good we have to be.

SM: I feel energized by listening to you. My last question: as we cannot escape hearing about Davos in these last days, why are you not there?

Laughs

CM: We were 5 minutes from jumping on the platform this year. Our DG is there. Of course, our DG has an overall focus, it's not just about training, but training and education are enablers for the kind of changes that we are talking about. It's about how we make it bigger. It's in incubation, but we'll be very happy to talk to you more about that.

SM: Thank you enormously both of you. It's been great. I feel energized myself.