



Photo: Angie Pálmai

# Understanding cultures, the culture of understanding

INTERVIEW WITH KATALIN JUHOS-LOCKEFEER, AN INTERNATIONALLY KNOWN AND ACCLAIMED TRAINER,  
MANAGEMENT COACH, FOUNDER AND OWNER OF BOREALIS PARTNERS

**CSENGER IS A PICTURESQUE** small town in North East Hungary with less than 6,000 inhabitants, and is the birthplace of several outstanding scientists and artists. My interviewee, Katalin Juhos-Lockfeer, also comes from here. Hailing from Csenger, she has since occupied leadership positions in companies such as Reuters. Even today, she gives intercultural training to international top managers, while her name is also tied to the structural development of numerous multinational companies. When we met at a small café in Pest, it was impossible not to notice Katalin when she entered. Her energy, directness, natural and assertive manner make you even unintentionally want to learn as much as possible about and from her.

### CSENGER, DEBRECEN AND THE BIG WORLD

*You have more than 25 years of international work experience. You are deemed to be one of the best management coaches at both foreign and Hungarian level. How did you find your road to international success from a small town in the 1980s?*

I went to high school in Debrecen, where we received a very strong, colourful and vibrant cultural education. I lived in the Reformed Church College dormitory in Debrecen, together with nine other girls in one room. Coming from various regions of Hungary, we all had different backgrounds. This diversity in itself impressed me. On top of that the school offered several international student exchange programmes. My father considered it important for me to familiarise myself with Western cultures, so at the age of 13 I was sent to see a friend in California for 3 months

over the summer. This experience opened up new horizons; it was almost like a fairy tale.

### COLOURS AND MEMORIES

*Who helped you in your development? Did you have a mentor?*

I had several mentors. In my teenage years I was writing letters to half the world from Japan to Australia. While exchanging letters, I gained an insight into others' way of life. Also, many partner schools visited the dormitory in Debrecen with students from Germany, Switzerland and the UK. I was inspired by this diversity, the different value systems and ways of thinking. But the person who really brought music and colours into my life was our Welsh English-language tutor Elystan Andrew David Miles. He was a trusting, kind-hearted and colourful character at school.



### FIVE YEARS, FOUR COUNTRIES

*You were 21 years old when the first important contract that you yourself had prepared, was signed in Berlin. Did you have a purposeful air so young?*

There were 5 years in my life that I just call my adventure-seeking years. Back then, I lived in America, England, the Netherlands and Germany as well. In some places I worked as an interpreter, while in others I learned languages or was an au pair. It so happened that an Englishman was once looking for a private German teacher for his daughter, who went to a boarding school and needed to work on her language skills. I was 19-20 years old, so I had the courage to apply. They picked me for the job from competitors in Düsseldorf. What is more, the German language also played a key role in the gentleman's work, so he asked me to interpret during his business trips. In the 1980s there was a high demand for construction plants after the reunion of Germany. I conducted negotiations and made preparations in relation to such a contract. It was signed in the Kempinski Hotel on the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin. Then and there I realised I want to do something like this.

*This led almost straight to Reuters...*

Well, we shouldn't forget about my university studies. At the end of my adventure-seeking years Oxford Brookes University established a partnership in Hungary with original curriculum and teachers. I began my studies here in Budapest in 1993.

The third year at university had to be completed by working for an international company as an intern. Everybody wanted to apply to Reuters, of course. A woman, who is still a friend of mine, said in the interview that she could imagine me rather as a sales woman. I insisted that marketing was my world. The situation was resolved by establishing a new position for me, namely, a business development job for introducing a new dial-up business database service. Right after that I was offered a full-time job. I spent approximately nine months in Geneva, studying technology and the money market as well as doing manager development training. My leadership career at Reuters lasted 8 years. Only 5% of the company functioned as a news agency,



## DON'T BE AFRAID TO GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE. THIS WILL SHAPE YOU UP.

95% of the revenue came from financial information, international financial trading and risk management systems. I worked in this field as a business development manager for four years. Then I was a regional manager in Scandinavia for another four years and a global key account team manager in Frankfurt am Main.

### UNDERSTANDING CULTURES

*Did those years in Scandinavia have the greatest impact on your career now?*

Essentially, yes. When I opted for the leadership position aimed at the business development of Norway and Iceland, I moved to Oslo and spent two years

there before living for another two years in Stockholm. After one year I got Sweden too. The entire Nordic region, along with the Baltic region, came after the second year. I managed an international team, with all its beauty and challenges. I learned it first-hand that the "Scandinavian" stereotype is not true. If you start to work in a certain region, you should handle nations with different cultural backgrounds separately, no matter how similar.

*What were your most influential experiences?*

Scandinavian countries are wonderful. People are less tired, there are no sources of unnecessary stress, and welfare is real. I could look at people as



*Katalin has always liked to learn new things. She had a businesslike vein she inherited from her father*

a female expat with a fresh perspective and without stereotyping them. Scandinavians say that Finnish people are more introverted but are quick on the uptake. When they come up with an idea, they pass it on to the Swedish, who are extremely efficient and sensitive to quality in production and implementation, taking precision to extremes. Danish people are recognised merchants, charming and excellent business people, who then sell the product to Norwegians, whose economy is booming thanks to oil resources.

*You have an illuminating story that illustrates how it feels to experience cultural differences firsthand. Sometimes everything depends on a coffee...*

Let's take the IKEA catalogue as an example. People often hold a coffee mug in their hand. For a very good reason. In my own culture I worked with a dynamic team that made prompt decisions. But in Sweden decisions are preceded by lengthy meetings, while drinking coffee. Such occasions can last 4 or 5 hours. They have one-level democracy, and I just trampled on it like a bull in a china



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### KATALIN JUHOS-LOCKFEER

**Born on 3 August 1969** in Csenger, Hungary, as the second child in a merchant and agricultural family. She was enriched by strong values and friendships in the Reformed Church High School in Debrecen. She has lived and studied in several countries, including the USA, the UK and the Netherlands.

**She holds a degree** in economics from Oxford Brookes University and another in organisation development supervision from International Business School.

**She worked for 4 years** as a seconded regional manager of Reuters in Norway, Sweden and Germany.

**Her professionalism** was inspired by many important figures, working together with acclaimed professionals like Verena Saegesser Wittmer, Gail Rolland, Wilfried de Philipp, Eszter Székelyné Kováts and Gudrun Nienaber.

**Katalin has been working** as a management development coach and organisation development expert in Hungary and worldwide for 12 years.

**She has a husband, Olaf,** and a son, **Márk Alexander.**

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shop. During coffee-time discussions people share their ideas, thoughts and recommendations. It is not the title that determines you as a manager, since you are rather a moderator who decides after reaching a consensus. After that the team implements everything in a very accurate and determined manner. Without a lengthy coffee meeting, people just leave the room, and nothing happens. It took a lot of energy from me and them until I realised how important these meetings are.

*Before long you worked in an increasingly broad intercultural sphere.*

At that time I already worked at global level, the world opened up. System integration projects were of paramount importance. We had an international “know-how pool”, first we had our base in Silicon Valley. It was an innovative “everything-is-possible” feeling, we made snap decisions. Scandinavian clients would have seen this agility as dangerous, so my team and I became a sort of cultural interface. We were an important communication channel. Then I worked as the Hungarian country manager of a German private credit card company, DKV EuroService. I was a repository of best practice in the so-called European Change Team. We gathered experiences and spread them to the other countries. We were a team of 8-10 with Dutch, German and Polish leaders.



### ALONE ON THE TOP

*People say leaders are alone on top.*

Back then I already had a feeling that I must cope with certain things on my own as a leader. I knew I wanted to give something to managers and leaders that makes them less isolated with their personal professional challenges. I wanted to give them careful attention and tools that enable them to find the best solution.

*Are partners and friends unable to give them this attention?*

A spouse will not necessarily be able to imagine a situation like those in the business. At the same time,

they don't have much insight into the complexity of intercultural differences in their partner's workplace.

*Do you think managers should accommodate themselves to subordinates or the other way round?*

I think that those with sound self-knowledge and consciousness are wiser. At the end of the day, responsibility rests with me. It is definitely good to develop together with others, but who is the first and the role model? The manager. Adaptation does not mean that I and the members of my team function the same way. Successful managers and leaders see who is good at what and exploit this whilst building on it. If I wait for others to operate just like me, each of us will feel considerable disappointment and frustration. Had I known this back then, I would have spent, if not four,



*Katalin's husband pursues his dreams likewise. He is a catering professional, but will become a medical doctor*



at least two hours drinking coffee in meetings. In my private opinion, responsibility lies with the manager and leader in the first instance.

## CONSCIOUSNESS AND BEING PRESENT

*After an international career of eight years you came home. Did you feel it was time to move on?*

I came home for family reasons, and this enabled me to slow down and plan for the future. I was thinking about further leadership development. This idea was reaffirmed when the members of my previous team turned to me for advice about being stuck and building a career. That is how my own company, Borealis Partners, was started 12 years ago. I was socialised in a coaching culture at Reuters, I was coached too. But external coaching development is a horse of another colour. What makes you a manager is that you can reach the objectives pursued. The real problem – and opportunity – lies in how much energy it takes from you and how you perceive the situation. I earned my second degree in organisation development supervision. This way I support leaders by helping them to

associate mindfulness and personal entanglement with conscious and quality decision making. You may even call it a stress or burn-out prevention approach. As I can see, coaching is used by the most successful managers and leaders.

*Besides being of great help to leaders, what advantages does coaching have at organisational level?*

Intercultural training is important from a human resource management perspective. For example, if an expat leaves because they cannot work in the given cultural environment, companies may incur enormous costs. In addition to leadership and intercultural training, I am also sought in relation to corporate culture integration and organisation development.

*Are you contacted in both individual and team matters?*

Currently I am working together with leaders in the USA, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Also, I hold leadership team building for a private clinic chain in Munich. I provide leaders of a Swiss company with team building

sessions at global level. I work in different locations with various teams and individuals.

## GETTING OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

*You have mentioned that self-awareness is very important to you.*

I like to live well; it's alright for me to feel good. The principle of "work hard, play hard" works for me well. I am not a victim of anybody or anything. I find constant and quality self-development important. I don't have any soil-bound fears. In my experience, Hungarians are usually restrained and have self-limiting perceptions when it comes to their successes. I see plenty of opportunity here, since talented and hard-working people live among us.

*Does your husband have a similar character?*

My husband comes from the Netherlands and has been living in Hungary for 15 years. We have a little son. Everything is in order now in our family, we have shared the tasks. He is extremely emancipated; we support and are happy for each other. He currently

goes to medical university as a change of career after 10 years. He worked in the catering industry, and travelled around the world. Then he had a restaurant and a guest-house in the Szekszárd wine region for 10 years. When he moved to Budapest, he felt it was time for a change. We thought that six years would pass regardless of whether he studies or not. The difference was what to expect after 6 years. Whether he would do what his heart desires or wave his hand "what if"... He is now 43, and was brave enough to change.

*What are your future plans, do you aim to develop further?*

I learn continuously, I apply the vast knowledge I have acquired over the past 25 years. I am inspired by various life situations, since they also make me develop significantly. I enjoy young managers' talent development. My job is never monotonous; the aim is that it will remain challenging. I learn the most when I get out of my comfort zone.

**TEXT: EDIT MCALISTER**

**PHOTOS: PÁLMAI ANGIE**