

Translation FD profile interview Kumsal Bayazit 11 January 2020

Intro in bold: *Kumsal Bayazit (45) travelled back and forth between Asia and Europe every day as a student in Istanbul. That crossing of the Bosphorus has shaped her view of the world. Now as CEO of Elsevier, she leads the largest scientific publishing company in the world*

Kumsal Bayazit (45) prefers not to use the word role model. That implies that there is only one example to follow. "I always tell people it is good to be authentic. This way you can find your own way in leadership. There is not one style that works. "

Yet it is not strange to regard her as a role model. Bayazit grew up in Istanbul, studied in the US and made after a first job in the consultancy, a career at the information company RELX. Since last year, she has been the CEO of RELX division Elsevier, the largest scientific information and data analysis company in the world. The head office is in Amsterdam.

Side window in bold: "My grandfather was one of those legendary men in the stories I grew up with".

Bayazit herself has a role model. Her grandmother was one of the first female lawyers in Turkey. With two working parents with intellectual roots - father was an architect and mother worked at the United Nations, among others - Bayazit cherishes her childhood years in Istanbul. These took place in the seventies and eighties, at a time when Turkey opened up more and more to the world.

Are you a European or Asian resident of Istanbul?

"We lived in the Asian part, but my school was in the European part. Every day I crossed the bridge that connects Europe with Asia. It is where East meets West. It has shaped my view about the world to a large extent. "

How do you look back on the bridge over the Bosphorus?

"The Asian side was always calmer and residential. The European side always felt more energetic. There was the old city, with also the great monuments such as the Hagia Sophia. I always felt more diversity on the European side. The restaurants, cafés and clubs were also on the European side. Every morning the day began with my journey across the bridge and then I saw those immense tankers who went to Russia via the Black Sea. As a child I thought it was great to see this. "

It is breathtakingly beautiful when you cross the bridge. But it is not only a sense of natural beauty, but also trust in that connection. Every morning the day began with my journey across the bridge and then I saw those immense tankers who went to Russia via the Black Sea. As a child I thought it was great to see this. "

Then why did you want to leave for the US?

"My father greatly encouraged me. I was able to follow a broader education - not just academically but also socially. Also, my grandfather graduated from Berkeley. In 1939. I never knew him, because he died when my mother was eighteen, but he was one of those legendary men in the stories I grew up with. A very beloved and respected person who built his own company. So, I also wanted to go to Berkeley because he had been there. "

Was the transfer to Berkeley difficult?

'No, I was always a good student. I got good grades. I loved my professors, was very stimulated by the academic environment. There were some cultural things. If you go out to dinner with friends in

Turkey, for example, everyone always insists on paying. That is culturally determined: you fight each other for the bill. By always doing this, on balance everyone in a group of friends will pay once. When I went out to Berkeley with friends, I kept saying: I insist that I pay for food. But after a while I realized that I was the only one who paid. “

You entered the consultancy. What did you remember most?

'Consultant is a great first job. You gain a lot of analytical skills, many experiences in the field of doing business. You learn to focus on the customer from day one. I worked really hard, ninety to a hundred hours a week. After three months I walked into one of the senior partners. I was overwhelmed and told him he had hired the wrong one. He said: "" Kumsal, when you are learning and developing yourself, you always feel overwhelmed and you seem to be failing. If you notice that, that's actually good. It means you're moving forward. "" I've always remembered that when I'm experiencing challenging situations again. Then look at it as if I'm learning. “

Do you still have the feeling that you are failing at times?

'Of course. The last few months at Elsevier were great, but also incredibly tough. I had to travel a lot, I also still have two young children. I met a lot of different stakeholders, I got to know the academic community. I have listened a lot. To understand what we do well as a company, but also what we need to do differently and better. Stretching yourself like that is hard. You need all muscles. “

Can you remember the first contract you had to conclude?

'Absolutely. That was at LexisNexis UK (a RELX subsidiary, ed.). In that time, we migrated our electronic data file from an old to a new platform. I had a number of large law firms as clients and one of them was really angry about the new platform. I listened for an hour and a half and was devastated. It was a big contract. After the meeting I went outside and just thought: how are we going to solve this? I have called the team together, discussed the issues. Then I went back to the customer to explain our approach. During my career I have lost contracts, but we managed to keep that contract, I remember that well. ‘

Your life is governed by meetings. What was the best?

"That was one when I just started in my strategy role at RELX. It was a high-level meeting with various external stakeholders, many advisors and important people. And early in the morning. I was the mother of a young child, ran to the meeting, talked fanatically and after a few minutes I pulled my hair back. I found a few sticky Cheerios in my hair (breakfast cereals for kids, ed.). I realized that everyone must have seen Cheerios. I thought it was really embarrassing, but I laughed. Then everyone laughed at it. After that I only took them all out of my hair. My son was then two years old. I still have to tell him this anecdote at least once a year. “

In what other ways do you bring a meeting to life?

"This year we also had a great meeting. The intention was to create mutual solidarity. We organized a kind of Lower House debate with seven or eight statements that you could be for or against. There were two sides in the room where people could stand, depending on their position. That's how we debated about it, the British way. If you changed your mind, you made the crossing to the other side. Sometimes it was 50/50, in other cases there was a strong preference for one or the other opinion. We really created involvement because everyone participated so actively. “

And as chairman you probably had to call 'Order order!'

"The employees at Elsevier are really good at the intellectual debate. You just have to create an environment in which that debate can be conducted, and then come to a decision that everyone can support. I think it is important to know everyone's point of view and to listen carefully. But in the end my natural tendency is to take action. “

At Elsevier, editors nowadays have to collaborate with IT people and data analysts. How do you encourage that?

'You have to build bridges so that they are able to understand each other well and can enter into dialogue with each other. So they understand what it looks like on the other side of the bridge. You have to constantly connect people to one another. After that the magic comes and you can step away from it yourself. '

Are you still going to Turkey to cross the Bosphorus?

'Absolutely yes. Like every good Turk, I have a very large family, with a lot of cousins, uncles and aunts. I'm still very Turkish. I really like Turkish hospitality. Like every good Turk, I always cook twice as much as necessary. My French husband still gets annoyed about it; the French like small portions. Yes, Turkey has changed since I left the country. '

For good or for bad?

"I don't want to comment on the political situation. But in general: the increasing polarisation in Turkey and in the rest of the world is disappointing and makes it even more important to build bridges. "

CV

1974 Born in Istanbul

1992 BA Economics University of California

1996 Consultant at Bain & Company, California

1999 MBA Harvard Business School

2004 Commercial Director LexisNexis, London, part of RELX

2008 Senior vice president, global strategy LexisNexis, New York

2012 Chief Strategy Officer RELX, London

2013 Chair Relx Technology Forum, London

2015 Non-executive director, LSL Property Services plc, London

2016 Regional president Europe, Africa, Middle East, Reed Exhibitions, part of RELX, London

2019 CEO Elsevier, part of RELX, London / Amsterdam