

Leadership and inspiration

In a special feature, *INTERGAMINGi* interviews a host of leading igaming executives to dig down into their business philosophies and leadership styles, in the process uncovering a few surprises

ISHUNIN MAXIM: HEAD OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT, 1XBET

OUTSIDE OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY, WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO MOST IN BUSINESS AND WHY?

I really like what is happening in the IT field. Leaders in this field are not afraid to be innovative and create, but a crucial factor at work here is organisation. It is important to understand that dozens of sleepless nights are behind the realisation of any ground-breaking idea.

IS THERE A PHRASE OR PHILOSOPHY YOU LIVE BY?

"Only you make yourself."

I have always been inspired by personalities such as Elon Musk and Steve Jobs. They were so different, but each endured a long and thorny path to success. And not so long ago, *The Last Dance* documentary about Michael Jordan was released – what a story about a great athlete! I try to focus on such people.

Today, the world gives you many opportunities for improvement. You just need to persevere and everything will work out! And I'm not only talking about our business careers, but also about personal self-realisation.

WHAT CAN ONLINE GAMING LEARN FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES?

I really like the way some brands conduct their marketing. This is a real art to learn.

We live right now in an era of advertising overload. People are already starting to feel stress from the amount of advertising that they see every day. That is why it is important not to annoy a potential client, but to be a friend and help solve any problems they may have.

The approach of individual brands is very impressive and serves as an example. But this needs to be studied in depth, because a quality promotion is the result of hard work.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES A SUCCESSFUL LEADER FROM AN UNSUCCESSFUL ONE?

I believe that the level of a leader is measured by the test of time. Take football, for example: one player may have one successful season, then not maintain that level and be benched. At the same time, another player may have developed their level of skill over the years – and it is these diligent sportspeople who are chosen as team captains. You must always grow and never come to a standstill.

Additionally, a true leader is always an adventurer at heart. More than once I have had

to make decisions the consequences of which were not always possible to even guess. But such decisions are what fuels progress in the field.

WHAT DO YOU READ AND LISTEN TO?

There is always a lot of debate about music, from rappers with strange hairstyles, Korean groups and other trends that are far from the understanding of many people. But I like young artists that are experimenting! I listen to different kinds of music and don't pay attention to other people's preferences. Deep House, Britpop – why not? You can't be shy about your musical tastes. I just enjoy different kinds of music.

Books are another story (excuse the pun).

First, there seems to be less and less time left for literature in the era of gadgets. But sometimes it's fulfilling to take one of the classics off the shelf and relax. My favourite work is *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway. A very motivating and engrossing story that I have re-read more than once.

WHAT DO YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY ON?

I would love to say that I bought a luxury yacht yesterday, but alas not!

At this stage of my life, I try to travel as much as possible. Sometimes these are for work meetings, but very rarely it's still possible to carve out a few days and fly to someplace captivating that is unknown to me.

Travelling is one of the rare opportunities to unlock new emotions. Any trip leaves pleasant memories and is not without adventure. Sometimes, awkward situations happen when you literally have to communicate with gestures because of the language barrier. I encountered this scenario in Mexico, where I saw many smiles when the locals heard my Spanish.

I'm not big on entertainment. I prefer to invest in self-development, the acquisition of

“THE WORLD GIVES YOU MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT. YOU JUST NEED TO PERSEVERE AND EVERYTHING WILL WORK OUT! AND I'M NOT ONLY TALKING ABOUT OUR BUSINESS CAREERS, BUT ALSO ABOUT PERSONAL SELF-REALISATION”

unique skills and knowledge. Uniqueness – this is the main value in the market. If you know what many others don't, doors will always be open to you.

HOW DO YOU BRING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR EMPLOYEES?

1xBet has a very close-knit team. This was made possible largely due to the personal qualities of both top managers and subordinates.

Here, creativity and a non-standard approach are always welcome. I do not interfere with my subordinates who voice their ideas. I myself know that it's very unpleasant when your ideas are not even given consideration.

I used to work under the direction of different people, not all of whom were effective managers. I looked at the mistakes of others, and said to myself: "I do not like this approach; I will lead in a different way."

I think everyone wants to feel they have a role in the team and take a direct part in the development of the product. At 1xBet it's more than possible.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE?

Two words: democracy and mentoring. I am convinced that a team should have a sense of justice and respect for each other. A totalitarian approach can still be found in other companies, but in my opinion, such methods give results only in the short-term and are not fair to employees.

I try to serve as an example for my colleagues. I do not create any special conditions for myself. Do you want to be respected? Then show that you can do the same job no worse than your subordinates, support them and inspire them.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS.
Believer in innovation.



SIMON WESTBURY: HEAD OF SALES, DIGITAIN

OUTSIDE OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY, WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO MOST IN BUSINESS AND WHY?

I look towards sport for inspiration and I have to say I take a pick-and-mix approach to learning and understanding how practices from sports, especially team sports, can be understood and applied within the business environment I operate in.

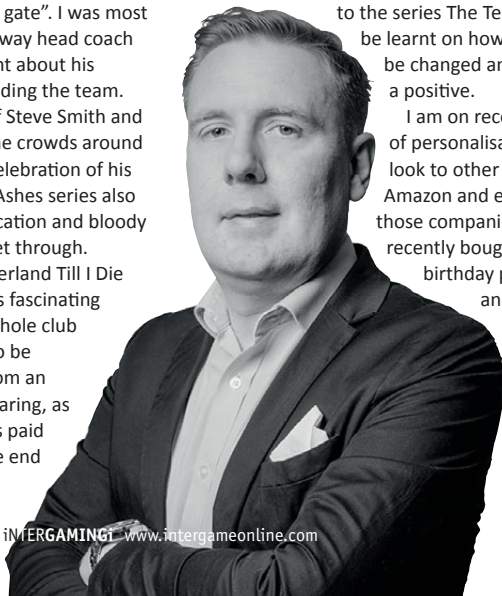
With lockdown in place over the last few months, I have moved on from reading sporting biographies to discovering Netflix, Amazon and Sky Sports documentaries. With my partner working on the front line in the local children's hospital and with no live sport, these documentaries have provided a wealth of knowledge and information to me.

Luckily enough, I worked around professional sport in my previous roles and I was fascinated by the psychology of professional sports people at the top level. Their drive and desire to work hard and be the best they can is insightful and inspiring to me. I always remember what my friend, who played professional football in a promotion winning side in the early 90s, said to me: "Simon, once you have had a little success, you do not sleep but you keep going." That may seem quite simple, but the amount of times I have seen people have a little success and think they have made it, rather than push on for more, is startling.

It also links into something Michael Jordan said in the Netflix series *The Last Dance* when he was talking about going for another NBA title: "You are only a success at the moment you perform a successful act."

I would also highly recommend the Amazon series *The Test* on the Australian cricket team as they looked to rebuild following on from "Sandpaper gate". I was most interested in the way head coach Justin Langer went about his business in rebuilding the team. The dedication of Steve Smith and how he turned the crowds around from booing to celebration of his talent during an Ashes series also showed the dedication and bloody mindedness to get through.

Also, the Sunderland *Till I Die* documentary was fascinating to see how the whole club culture needed to be transformed - from an attitude of "not caring, as the owner always paid the cheque at the end of the month" to



transformation to a more lean business.

Finally, I have been lucky enough to see up close the work Chris Wilder has done at Sheffield United since he took over back in 2016. The way he has created a team in his own image, reconnected the club to the fanbase and developed a style of play that is succeeding at the top level, is truly inspiring.

IS THERE A PHRASE OR PHILOSOPHY YOU LIVE BY?

Take life by the horns, hold on as long as you can, enjoy the ride and when you get thrown off, dust yourself off and go again.

Sometimes, to gain some perspective I jump in the car and listen to Everybody's Free by Buzz Luhrmann. There is a lot of common sense in the words that are spoken and it allows me to recalibrate my thoughts and go again.

“WITH EVERY NEW PRODUCT OR CONCEPT THE CUSTOMER NEEDS SOME FORM OF EDUCATION BUT IF THE CUSTOMER BUYS INTO THE NEW TECHNOLOGY PRODUCT THE REWARDS CAN OUTWEIGH THE RISK”

WHAT CAN ONLINE GAMING LEARN FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES?

I believe that the gaming industry needs to learn from other industries that have re-connected with their ethos and build an industry brand that is positive and outward looking. At the moment, there is a spotlight on the industry about compliance and player protection, based on a misunderstanding that the industry exploits people.

We need to focus on the entertainment aspect, which is what we are as an industry at our core. This is a microcosm, but going back to the series *The Test*, there are lessons to be learnt on how public perception can be changed and a negative turned into a positive.

I am on record as saying that in terms of personalisation for players we can look to other companies such as Netflix, Amazon and eBay. I am not saying those companies have the solution - I recently bought my partner some birthday presents through Amazon and I have been inundated with ads for the product I have already bought. However, they do give some signposts to how we as an industry can go from a one size fits all model.

Finally, I would say the ability to take risk. When I have seen innovation or invention in the industry and tried to sell these concepts, I normally hear back from operators, "we would need to educate our customers on this", which can be translated to "we like the product but we are not buying it." If we continue to adopt this approach, we will become stale as an industry. With every new product or concept the customer needs some form of education but if the customer buys into the new technology product the rewards can outweigh the risk. Sometimes I feel we are afraid to fail so we miss out on success.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES A SUCCESSFUL LEADER FROM AN UNSUCCESSFUL ONE?

The ability to listen. I got some very good advice when I was at University, doing my MA in Middle East Politics, in the cut and thrust of an argument relating to possible solutions to a regional conflict where both sides had pretty entrenched positions. My lecturer, Dr Larbi Sadiki, who is probably the most academically intelligent person I have ever met, interrupted the conversation and said if you take this part from your argument and combine it with this point from the opposing argument, do you have a viable solution?

It was a bit of lightbulb moment on reflection and one I was not very good at adopting when I started leading teams and companies. I believed it was important to be seen as strong and decisive - making decisions without consultation or objectivity.

I had my vision and come hell or high water, this was going to be done. Chris Davies, my CEO at VSoftCo, gently mentored me to see things in another way and this synced with the lesson from Dr Sadiki. I have learned to engage, listen and make the team feel valued. I always say I may not agree with your view or outlook, but I will always listen to it. I found this a great source of learning and it also means the team you lead comes with you.

WHAT IS THE NUMBER ONE LESSON YOU HAVE LEARNED AS A RESULT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC?

Momentum. When the world went into lock down, everything stopped due to uncertainty. However, I said to the team we need to build momentum during these troubled times and we cannot simply give up. Through hard work, we have built that momentum as a team and a company, leading to last two months being the best two months for Digitain in terms of new partner agreements.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS.

Kaleidoscopic.

MARTIN WACHTER: CEO AND FOUNDER, GOLDEN RACE

OUTSIDE OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY, WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO MOST IN BUSINESS AND WHY?

There is only one person I look up to: Arnold Schwarzenegger. Not only because he is Austrian; he is the only guy who leads what he talks about. If you follow his whole life, everything he wanted to become, he became, while he always believes in himself. He comes from a normal family, he was Mister Universe, then he decided to become a movie star and he may have become one of the biggest movie stars ever; then he wanted to become governor and he became governor in the biggest state of USA, California.

IS THERE A PHRASE OR PHILOSOPHY YOU LIVE BY?

"Don't dream your life, live your dream."

WHAT CAN ONLINE GAMING LEARN FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES?

This is a very tough question, because every industry has their own rules. I don't think there is another industry to learn from. Online gaming is an old industry and one of the biggest ones, so it doesn't have to learn but just do the homework.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES A SUCCESSFUL LEADER FROM AN UNSUCCESSFUL ONE?

A successful leader leads by example and doesn't pretend to be someone they are not.

WHAT DO YOU READ AND LISTEN TO?

All my career, I have read a lot of books about famous people who did some amazing things. Especially now during quarantine that I have had some time at home, this helped me out a lot during the saddest days. There are many books I love but for sure, if someone would ask me today which are the books I believe in or get me where I am now, I would say *The Science of Getting Rich* by Wallace D Wattles, while others could be *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill and *Blink* by Malcom Gladwell.

These are my three top books that brought me to where I am and gave me a lot of power, especially the first one I mentioned. When business was not good or my life did not go as I chose, it helped me a lot.

On music, I like and listen to every kind of music, but my favourite is

electronic music – especially DJ Boris Břejcha.

WHAT DO YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY ON?

When I started the business, my dream was to become rich and successful. At that time, money was all, but during the last years I have realised that I only need one meal and one breakfast, I can drive only one car and live in one house at the same time.

I am a social guy and I spend money on different sports. I sponsor different people in my village in Austria in different sports, where it is difficult to get a sponsorship. I have my project together with Golden Race in Kenya, where we spend money on children, helping them with scholarships. This is what I spend my money on. It makes me feel happy to help others.

HOW DO YOU BRING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR EMPLOYEES?

I empower them, give them trust and believe in them. I lead by example and do not push them. I just let them work, helping them if they need it and show them that they are important.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE?

I work hard and I do not expect anything from my people that I am not willing to do on my own. I do not want to act like a real boss, I want to be a friend – even if sometimes it's difficult.

WHAT IS THE NUMBER ONE LESSON YOU HAVE LEARNED AS A RESULT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC?

The number one lesson would be that it is incredible we needed a pandemic like this to learn how to wash our hands!

The second thing I have learned is that I can trust my team, because people worked harder than ever. They show me we are a great team. I want to thank all of them: they were loyal, even in this critical situation.

“I HAVE REALISED THAT I ONLY NEED ONE MEAL AND ONE BREAKFAST, I CAN DRIVE ONLY ONE CAR AND LIVE IN ONE HOUSE AT THE SAME TIME”

HOW WILL IGAMING EVENTS CHANGE IN THE FUTURE?

My personal opinion is that nothing is going to change. More digital tools will be used in the future, and there may be some digital events, but this type of events is colder and will never replace the classic exhibitions where people face each other, socialise and see the product in front of them.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS.

Never give up.



JAMES MARSHALL: CEO AT PUSH GAMING

OUTSIDE OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY, WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO MOST IN BUSINESS AND WHY?

I'm an admirer of former Disney CEO Bob Iger and have been listening to him a lot of late. He turned a business around that relied too heavily on its name and needed to adapt. Disney was fortunate to be able to make huge acquisitions in Pixar, Lucas Films and Marvel. But it was Iger who had the vision which is really paying off for them and I take a lot of inspiration from his desire to learn and evolve.

While the company strictly set out to be a content creator and not a distributor, it has adapted fantastically to the changes in technology and the market, and now has one of the biggest direct to consumer apps in Disney+. There are a few companies in our industry like Disney, that have relied too heavily on their brand. We have to learn from this mistake, as we have attracted a great following but cannot afford to rest on our laurels.

IS THERE A PHRASE OR PHILOSOPHY YOU LIVE BY?

In business, it's the user who decides. Ultimately, what this means is that whatever you're doing, be it making sandwiches or games, you want a person to consume your product over that of your competitor, so you have to make a product that the user wants. That doesn't mean modelling your approach on your own preferences, or a small sample of the market, but instead looking to cater to take the entire user base into account when approaching development. In our market you cannot rely on data. You have to do all you can to truly understand your user base, or even potential user base.

WHAT CAN ONLINE GAMING LEARN FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES?

I sometimes think the industry is too money focused and short-termist. We're in entertainment; people pay to be entertained. If you look at a lot of other successful businesses, they try to give the user as much value as

possible. Netflix is cheap for what you get, for example, as are things like YouTube, which focuses on free content and engagement. For the consumer these are manageable and sustainable costs and work in the long term, delivering great retention for the company in return. It is about having brilliant products whilst giving the customer great value. There's a lot we need to learn here and I'd like to see the industry doing more to develop brilliant, long-term products that offer great value to players.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES A SUCCESSFUL LEADER FROM AN UNSUCCESSFUL ONE?

I think a successful leader really understands the detail of their market and its evolution, as well as how the users or paying customers are transacting with their products. Unsuccessful leaders are generally too short sighted and constantly looking for quick commercial wins, that are exactly that: short-term.

“I'M LEARNING FROM EVERYONE AROUND ME AND I HIGHLIGHT MY IMPERFECTIONS AS MUCH AS I CAN TO HOPEFULLY ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO FEEL MORE CONFIDENT IN WHAT THEY'RE GOOD AT RATHER THAN WORRY ABOUT WHAT THEY'RE NOT”

WHAT DO YOU READ AND LISTEN TO?

I buy into a lot of content through podcasts and audiobooks. I have been following Gary Vaynerchuk for a long time now and he has been very consistent in a lot of his messages and gives fantastic advice. He also has some great guests on his podcast. I also really like listening to Brené Brown. She's brilliant and encourages authenticity and vulnerability as a leader. I'd recommend her book *Dare to Lead*. Tilman Fertitta is another one. He runs a number of hospitality businesses, but I picked up his name as the owner of Golden Nugget casinos. His new book *Shut Up and Listen* is great. I really like his saying: "There are no spare customers." It's a reminder to

look after each and every one.

WHAT DO YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY ON?

I enjoy playing slots, to be honest. But I recently spent more money than planned on a road bike and have been doing quite long rides. There's always something new to buy for it, or clothes. When I first went out in December it was freezing and I just thought, I'm not going to enjoy this. But I have invested too much to turn back now and I'm pleased I kept at it. It has been a brilliant release getting out during this time.

HOW DO YOU BRING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR EMPLOYEES?

I try to give people responsibility and encourage them to take on challenges. We have so many people in the company that have grown at such a fast pace. They're not stopping either and I know their potential is huge. I'm not sure how much credit I can take for it, but I'm immensely proud of the team that we've built at Push Gaming and the attitudes, talent and character of the people I get to work with every day.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE?

I like to be in the detail with the team and am hugely passionate about our industry, the products and players. I don't see myself as the boss, just someone that is very motivated to build a great place to work, with great people and products. I'm learning from everyone around me and I highlight my imperfections as much as I can to hopefully encourage others to feel more confident in what they're good at rather than worry about what they're not. I take guidance from our team, too, really considering what they're saying. I want the company to be successful and, in order for that to happen, each individual in the company needs to achieve and be successful.

WHAT IS THE NUMBER ONE LESSON YOU HAVE LEARNED AS A RESULT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC?

I feel that we're very lucky to be in the digital entertainment industry and on the gaming side of betting and gaming. We have been able to grow as a business and have demonstrated we can adapt quickly. It reminds me of a quote by boxer Mike Tyson: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth!" We're lucky we haven't been punched this time, or at least we haven't felt the effects yet, but I've learned to expect the unexpected and be ready to adapt.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS.

Authentic, creative and dedicated. Others that know me might choose three very different words!



SALVATORE MARINO: SALES DIRECTOR, STAKELOGIC

OUTSIDE OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY, WHO DO YOU LOOK UP TO MOST IN BUSINESS AND WHY?

Coca-Cola has always been close to my heart as I am fascinated by its marketing and business development strategies. Through the years, it was able to reach and expand into remote markets and solidify its presence for the foreseeable future.

IS THERE A PHRASE OR PHILOSOPHY YOU LIVE BY?

I think a philosophy that I stick to is “motivate through inspiration”. I want to be the person that proactively inspires and motivates my colleagues to reach their own personal goals and then towards the vision of the team and organisation.

WHAT CAN ONLINE GAMING LEARN FROM OTHER INDUSTRIES?

We definitely see other industries more committed to giving back to the community than online gaming businesses. In times like these, it would be encouraging to see more operators getting involved in CSR (Company Social Responsibility) projects that aim to help those who need it.

WHAT DIFFERENTIATES A SUCCESSFUL LEADER FROM AN UNSUCCESSFUL ONE?

In my opinion, a successful leader is someone that gives their team the opportunity to shine whilst also helping in guiding that team to success.

WHAT DO YOU READ AND LISTEN TO?

My favourite band of all time has to be Queen. Their music was innovative in a time when it was difficult to be different. I consider them timeless.

I mostly read *Business Insider* magazines that help provide insight and gain new ideas for the industry I work in. The last book that I read though was *Way of the Wolf* by Jordan Belfort, who was immortalised in the movie *Wolf of Wall Street*.

WHAT DO YOU SPEND YOUR MONEY ON?

I really like dressing up smartly and taking care of my health. Along with that, I also consider myself to have been hit by the travel bug, hitting 80,000 miles in both 2016 and 2017!

“ I CONSIDER MYSELF TO BE A TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADER AS I LOVE TO ENCOURAGE MY TEAM TO SET THEIR PERSONAL GOALS THAT DIRECTLY ALIGN WITH THE OVERALL COMPANY GOALS ”

HOW DO YOU BRING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR EMPLOYEES?

The strongest tool a leader should have is trusting in their employees. Showing appreciation for their hard work and dedication empowers them to strive for more and for me, having a team that is hungry is what I find important.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR LEADERSHIP STYLE?

I consider myself to be a transformational leader as I love to encourage my team to set their personal goals that directly align with the overall company goals. Having monthly and quarterly meetings to review the team’s progress allows us to identify any channels that would not be performing as well and give us the insight as to where we should shift our efforts to hit those goals.

WHAT IS THE NUMBER ONE LESSON YOU HAVE LEARNED AS A RESULT OF THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC?

The one thing that this pandemic has confirmed for me is that innovation comes from crisis. Even though it took a big toll on businesses, companies around the world took to the online space for safety and security where they found technology that could potentially save their businesses.

HOW WILL IGAMING EVENTS CHANGE IN THE FUTURE?

As we have seen over the past few months, igaming events have shifted into being digital events where we have seen some amazing innovation in terms of having virtual stands and managing to still book meetings with companies all over the world. I personally love having that personal touch when meeting prospective clients or partners, but having this additional channel will definitely benefit us when it comes to being present in a space with our target audience.

DESCRIBE YOURSELF IN THREE WORDS.

If I had to describe myself, I would say highly-motivated, self-driven and humorous.

