



SUCCESS IS AN ELUSIVE GOAL

Alexander Petrov, Member of the Management Board – Managing Director at SIBUR, spoke to us about life's choices, success drivers and helping people.

On the chemistry behind choices

I studied at a physics and maths specialised high school. It had two key streams: chemistry/biology and physics/math. I chose the latter. At the time, biology and chemistry seemed like quite abstract sciences to me. A year and a half before I finished high school, I started to choose between universities – not consciously, but through inertia. I aimed for Kyiv Polytechnic Institute, the biggest technical university in Ukraine, and its Faculty of Applied Mathematics. In the end, I applied to go there. But I second-guessed my choice, thinking: Kyiv is all well and good, but Moscow is something else entirely. At the same time, the parents of one of my classmates were planning to send him off to study in Moscow, but they didn't want him to go alone. My parents supported me in choosing a Moscow university. That's how I enrolled at Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation. The choice to go into finance was almost random: we were young and didn't really understand what it entailed, but there was this sense that the uni was prestigious and the degree was sought after. But we were certain that this study all centred around our beloved maths.

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On choosing a profession rooted in your childhood

The choice of profession is, in my opinion, one of life's three most important decisions. But if I'm honest, it's not always clear why people choose a certain path and what drives their decisions. It doesn't matter who I discuss this issue with, whether they're from Russia or abroad, it turns out that there was always a 'fork in the road', a combination of coincidences that could have pushed life in a different direction. It's possible that your choice was rooted in your odd childhood hobbies. For example, even back then I was fascinated by money, and I loved counting it. (He laughs). During the Soviet times, my grandma lived in the Krasnodar Territory, near to the coast of the Black Sea. Whenever I stayed with her, we used to go to the seaside every other day, as she sold vegetables at a market there. In the evening, on the way back home, I almost always used to count up what we took. Looking back at those times, I smile now, but it was probably the start of it all.



Alexander Petrov with his family.

On the value of support

Putevka v Zhizn (Road to Life) is a charity that I support. It focuses on helping gifted teenagers, who wouldn't otherwise be able to

afford it, to access a quality higher education. I reckon that more than half of our work is devoted to fostering values and engaging the young people in conversations about motivations and choosing what to orient their lives around, and only then providing financial assistance. When they talk with our foundation's people – peers from outside their circle – their world view changes and they understand that they can expand their own horizons, if they want to.

In this regard I was lucky; my parents believed in me wholeheartedly. When I was studying at high school, they didn't even check my school planner. Their trust gave me the confidence that I can – and should – make decisions for myself. That's what freedom of choice means. My father was in construction, and my mother worked her way up from being an engineer in the Estimating Department of a construction company to becoming the Head of the Economic Planning Department at a Regional Division of Ukrainian Railways. To pay for my education in Moscow, they had to sell some of their property; they were willing to support me all the way. This support spurred me on.



The first holiday at home after moving to Moscow (with his brother and father).

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On investing as a hobby

The best way to justify unsuccessful financial ventures is to call them a hobby. (He smiles). I'm more interested in the process itself. Real investing allows you dive into areas of the economy that are not available in your current work and life, and get involved with them. Turning a profit is on the backburner for me. I still believe that being a professional venture capitalist and working with start-ups is a worthy alternative to a corporate career. But I went for the corporate route because I realised that I wanted to be part of a large team, where the scope of challenges and self-fulfilment was an order of magnitude greater.

My debut investment was in a team who were developing a social network with photos and short captions underneath; and this was seven years before Instagram hit the scene! However, they over-engineered it, and the project didn't take off. Friends of friends sometimes approach me, as they know I'm interested in certain kinds of projects. The main way of choosing a venture investment is by

networking with the founders themselves. But chance also plays a role here; for example, the project that turned into my most successful investment came to me by sheer coincidence: I wanted to finance one team, but they had already finished collecting bids and simply recommended their friends to me.

I find start-ups fascinating and inspiring. A whole-new generation is launching them – they are a different breed of people, mostly multinational teams with strongly diverse industry backgrounds. I learn more about the world through them. I find them more interesting than a guided tour at a tourist destination.



Beyond the Arctic Circle.

On leadership in the corporate jungle

You're a valuable manager if you can drive change at your organisation. There is a certain level of bureaucracy at any organisation, but especially at the majors. If you see bureaucracy as a natural jungle, where you need not just to survive, but to thrive, it becomes much easier. Bureaucracy is a conscious, yet artful process that shapes a company's landscape. A manager is highly skilled if they can spark and sustain change in this ecosystem without losing sight of the ultimate goal.

At the same time, you have to realise that you are nobody – your team is everything. Strong, harmonious teams are needed for large-scale initiatives. There are times when the leader needs to get off the pitch and sit on the bench, giving others the chance to prove themselves. These kinds of teams stand out for their high level of trust.



Alexander Petrov gets ready for a KAMAZ truck race with Sergey Komyshan (right), Member of the Management Board – Executive Director at SIBUR.

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On trust

Let me try to outline several components of trust. Firstly, there is the ability to hold an open and honest conversation. Secondly, the team should get everyone on the same page. Everyone should be up to speed with what's happening and be aware not only of the current situation but also of the stages on the roadmap to the goal. Thirdly, an analysis of failure and a response to it. Teams need to be taught to see failure as a valuable source of knowledge and experience, and to reflect adequately on them.

On success

Do I consider myself successful? Probably, yes. I certainly don't regret anything. I can look back fondly and have lots to look forward to as well. Success is an elusive goal, it's so dynamic and at different stages of life, it takes on a new meaning. One of the key factors in success is... It's like riding a bike: you have to recognise when to push the different pedals, accelerate or brake. Another is understanding what skills and competencies are applicable in each individual situation. This is an art of itself.

Also, being able to sincerely and respectfully communicate with people is important; you need to be a team player, realise the importance of this and act according to the circumstances, even if it means taking a back seat when necessary. I can use an example from football: if you dribble the ball, you might be able to score. But if your teammate is in a better position, you can pass the ball and they won't let you down. Trust also plays a role here.

You must set out success criteria for the team, as well as for yourself. This lets you strengthen and develop relationships, to achieve a balanced contribution from colleagues towards the north star.



Karting at a SIBUR customer event in Naberezhnye Chelny.

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What is important? Key takeaways

- It's important to act. If you want to build castles in the sky, go ahead, but look how far it gets you afterwards.
- It's important to have a positive attitude and believe that everything can be changed.
- It's important to be at peace with yourself and your business, without lying to yourself.
- It's important to not just focus on what you're doing, but also what you're missing in the process. For example, sometimes in the corporate world I see that people under a heavy load begin to 'live by the calendar', so to speak. Time begins to manage them, when it should be the other way around. You need to be in control of the current: catch it and keep swimming.
- It's important to persevere and be consistent when striving towards goals, seeing failures as a source of knowledge.

Interviewed by Varvara Fufaeva