

Graduation Speech to the MBA Class of 2011

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Esteemed ESMT faculty and staff members, guests and fellow graduates: December 16th 2011 has been a red-letter day on all our calendars since our arrival, marking the end of a journey officially launched by our founding dean, Professor Wulff Plinke. In his welcome address, Wulff quoted Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914 advertisement for brave souls to join an expedition to Antarctica; it read *"Men Wanted: For Hazardous Journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success."*

We soon learnt that he was not being metaphorical about the bitter cold when the next day, Andreas Bernhardt led us on a five-hour journey through snow, guided by hand-drawn maps and compasses to get baby Knut safely to a castle in Boitzenburg. It struck me how that experience embodied the year-long journey whose end we celebrate today. I say so in the context of the school's mission, which is to develop **entrepreneurial leaders who think globally, act responsibly and respect the individual**; or in Zoltan Antal-Mokos' words, to help each of us become "a better myself".



I would like to share with you some insight on how the journey to "a better myself" unfolded for us this year.

Being an entrepreneurial leader requires three things: courage to try something new and push boundaries; resourcefulness in finding solutions; and stamina to do what needs doing.

The Boitzenburg mission had us navigating unfamiliar territory to find the castle. Through the year, we all showed this same courage in tackling new things - studying in a language we do not use in daily lives, hosting webinars, cracking Guillermo Baquero's

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spreadsheets and so on. We challenged our personal boundaries everyday.

In Boitzenburg, we drew our maps, organized ourselves and then, the surprise: we had to swap maps and follow the other team's instructions. The lesson was that success is less dependent on what we know and more on how we work through uncertainty to find solutions. All year we built on this skill. The consulting projects are good example. In some cases the exact business problem was not so clear, and we worked from getting clarity to delivering something of value to the client.

The long trek to deliver baby Knut was symbolic of acting responsibly. Often, leaders must go the extra mile for the defenseless and voiceless who cannot thank or repay. Henry Ford once said a business that makes nothing but money is a poor business. We learnt how seriously the school takes this early in the program during a business simulation exercise with CB Bhattacharya. Working in teams, our goal was to run fishing businesses in a specific catchment area. We invested, traded, planned and outsmarted each other. At the end, we made much money but there were no fish left in the sea. We paid attention to this learning; an example to illustrate this is the Social Impact Club's staging of the school's first charity benefit concert this year in collaboration with "Hauptstadblech".

Coming to stamina; we got to the castle after dark, some of us with wet knees and wet bottoms after landing in icy puddles. However, I'm proud to say that the attitude was as upbeat at the end as at the start of the exercise. This can-do attitude took us through all-nighters, jam-packed calendars and the ultimate test: the thesis. I acknowledge with special appreciation the cheer-leaders and chief motivators among us who always had a smile, a hug and a helping hand to offer when the going was particularly tough.

Thinking globally and respecting the individual were surprisingly intertwined as we were constantly surrounded by over 20 nationalities and working in different teams. In Boitzenburg each team member made a unique contribution. We had map-readers, reconnaissance teams reading the landscape for clues on whether we were still on course and still others in front identifying dangerous icy patches for the others to avoid. Similarly, through the year, with everyone's active contribution we learnt from each other almost as much as we learnt from our professors. I know more today about Russia, India, Georgia, Moldova and Romania than I imagined I would this time last year.

The most interesting thing for me was how although we are so different, seeing each other is so easy in ESMT. Unlike in Ernest Shackleton's expedition, we never felt in danger and every day the palpable human spirit made our lives brighter. Even before we got here the MBA Admissions office worked miracles to move mountains of German bureaucracy out of our way. Thanks to them, even before I got here I felt I had friends and I was not wrong. We had the privilege of first-rate faculty who are not only on top of their professional game, but also had time for us beyond classes, at lunch tables, in bergfests or on the soccer field.

Marie and Jolene, our guardian angels, babied us all year. I remember waiting in a hotel lobby in Paris while Marie calmed a very agitated receptionist late one Friday night not too long ago. Ralph, Marina, Ina, Karen, Nicole, Robert, Sharief and all others whose names not mentioned - thank you for your commitment and cheerfulness! You worked in the background every day and that made our lives much easier. Although I never found it, I suspect that there's a secret "be nice" boot-camp somewhere on this campus. Perhaps on my next visit as an alumnus, I will find it.

For us, honor and recognition came throughout the year; we celebrated every victory along the way, like the end of a module or the fact that summer was here.

Although they are not here, as I prepared this speech I thought about how I'd explain to my children why I spent a year away. I struggled quite a bit with this because I know it has been hard for them. Today my parents are here and I have the rare privilege of sharing some of my mother's wisdom in her presence. My mother is a teacher and has nurtured young minds for over 50 years. She graduated from her Masters degree when she was 64 years old. I tell this because I think she knows a few things about a few things.

When I was very young, my mother told me something that I believe explains why many of us came on this journey. She told me that I was born with my fists clenched because I was holding all the gifts that God had given me, and that my life's job is to open my hands. There are two lessons in this: firstly, that each of us has unique gifts that come as seed to be nurtured. Secondly, that just as an apple tree bears apples not for itself but for others, so these gifts are given to us but do not belong to us; they are meant for others.

"A better myself" then, means that we owe it to ourselves and others to do all we can to grow what we've been given and use it for those around us.

In closing therefore, ladies and gentlemen, I fully intend to enjoy this red-letter day and I trust that you join me in that intent. Although we finish a journey today, the bigger journey that this one forms part of waits for us tomorrow. I wish each of us much joy and fulfillment as we follow it.