

How Life Prepared Me to Be a Leader

Lessons from Prestige CEO Darina Stoyanova

I grew up in Bulgaria during Communism—a time when women worked equally to men. There was a famous slogan at the time that said “without work, life is neither beautiful nor worthy.” I had a working mother, too, and my childhood image of her was not dissimilar to Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Think big boss walking around in high heels, invincible, devoted and passionate about her job. This was the idea of work and leadership that I was surrounded by growing up, and which—whether I knew it at the time or not—was preparing me to become a leader myself one day. I’m now the CEO of Prestige, at looking back, I can see that the lessons that have made me the leader I am today were instilled in me since I was a young girl.



Darina Stoyanova
CEO



Lesson #1: The Power of Girls

I’m grateful that I grew up with a working mother. She set the example of the ultimate powerful woman, and showed me what I could become myself one day. I can trace my early ideas of leadership to this key lesson my mother instilled in me: the power of girls.

Lesson #2: Take Responsibility

I was the firstborn, and while I was raised in a big and loving family, I also was subjected to those high standards reserved for the oldest child: I was expected to be the most responsible and be the best in school to set a good example for my younger brother and cousins. Naturally, as a kid, I hated this role, but as I grew older, I was grateful that taking responsibility for myself and my actions had become second nature. After all, if you want to be a leader, you need to first take responsibility.



Lesson #3: Nurture a Winning Mindset

I was very fortunate to grow up with parents telling me as often as they could that I was very good, very capable, and could succeed at everything. This wasn't strictly true—I was a total disaster when it came to sports, but this mantra they repeated to me constantly became my own mantra. I can succeed at everything with enough effort and energy. I didn't realise it then, but my parents were helping me build a winning mindset from a young age, and it's one that I carry with me to this day.

Lesson #4: Strong Values are Crucial

It's perhaps an underrated lesson, but it's one of the most important ones to hold close in the business world: strong values will always light the way. This is something my parents and grandparents drilled into me. They taught me always to be honest, hardworking, and to give more than you get. Helping others without expecting anything in return is one of the best things you can do in life.

Lesson #5: Your Voice will be Respected if you Respect Yourself

I grew up at a unique time: during communism, it was very difficult—almost impossible—to go to a Western country, and I visited a foreign country for the first time in my life when I was 16 years old. Just one year later, when I was 17, the Communist regime ended, and my classmates and I took part in demonstrations, blocked schools and streets, and collected signatures against the regime. This activism showed me that if you respect yourself, your voice will be respected as a result.

Lesson #6: Aim High, Start Small

It's great to aim high, but remember you've got to start somewhere. This is a lesson I learnt when I was studying. After the end of communism, I was eager to connect with the world, and to live and work in multicultural and international environments. I went to university to study International Business Relations, but I soon realised that the program wasn't comprehensive enough to prepare us for real business in the post-communist economic environment. This was the time when international companies started entering Bulgaria, and to gain some real-world experience, I applied for an assistant position at a multinational company during my studies. I spent 3 years as an assistant to the CEO, and my husband, who I was dating at the time, claims that I told him I would become CEO myself one day.

Lesson #7: Stay True to your Dreams

Sometimes, you'll find yourself in a situation where your head and heart are telling you different things. At the start of my career, I was working as an Office Manager at a reputable multinational company in Bulgaria. I had a job that was well-paid, with lots of benefits, which was great—but it wasn't what I wanted to do. My real wish was to go into marketing, and there weren't any opportunities for that sort of thing at my company. I decided to leave, because I knew that the longer I stayed, the harder it would become to say goodbye to a secure job with good benefits. For the first time in my life, my friends and family didn't support this decision: they simply couldn't comprehend why I was leaving what seemed like a dream job. The problem was, it wasn't my dream job. It was only years later that I could turn round and say I made the right choice. It's like that Steve Jobs quote: you can only connect the dots looking back.



Lesson #8: Happy and Fulfilled Parents Raise Happy and Fulfilled Children

A lot has been said about 'mum guilt'. I went back to the office when my son was 3 months old, and during those first few months, I was working from home. This was in 1999, and we didn't yet call it 'home office', but that's what it was. In Bulgaria, you can take maternity leave until your child is 3 years old, but I was actually eager to work. I had the full support of my husband and parents, and a lot of support to draw on. But there have been people during the years who have accused me of being a bad mother because I went back to the office when he was a baby. When I was spending time with him, it was high-quality time: he had my undivided attention, and the rest of the time, he was surrounded by love from other people. Even so, the comments would make me doubt myself from time to time. My son is now 24, and he's grown up to be a good person. I'm very proud of him, and he is very proud of me. Don't let others guilt you for being a hard-working parent: happy and fulfilled parents raise happy and fulfilled children.

Lesson #9: Make Choices that Make you Happy

It sounds obvious, but there can be a lot of pressure on people to have work-life balance. The reality is that if the definition of balance is 50:50, that's just not realistic for everyone. I've never had work-life balance, and work still takes up much more of my time than other things. But here's what I always tell young managers: don't search for work-life balance—make choices that make you happy. For some people, that will be work-life balance, but the point is, balance looks different to everybody.

Lesson #10: Don't be Afraid to Ask for Help

The final lesson? Talk to other women. Ask for help—and help them as much as you can. There are many people who have been in the exact position you're in right now. Whatever's happening, you're not alone. Reach out, build community, and don't forget the lesson my parents taught me as a young girl: give more than you get.

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About LEAD Network

LEAD Network is a non-profit and volunteer-led organisation whose mission is to attract, retain and advance women in the retail and consumer goods industry in Europe through education, leadership and business development.

LEAD Network is run by and for its members, women and men, and we value every individual for their unique perspective. With a primary focus on promoting gender equality, the organisation strives for the advancement of women of every race, ethnicity, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, educational background, national origin, religion, physical ability and lifestyle. Its vision is of a fair, diverse and vibrant industry where everyone can thrive. A diverse workforce where both men and women are enabled to contribute their full potential and lead their organisations to the next level of value creation. LEAD Network accounts for 18,000+ members – both women and men – from 81 countries.