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Q&A: Meat-Maker Dymov Prefers People to Sausage

By Lena Smirnova

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Dymov believes that Russia's youth is becoming more savvy at understanding and emulating good leadership. **Vladimir Filonov**

Come New Year's Eve, Vadim Dymov's dacha in Suzdal will be bustling with more guests than on most weekends. The house in the Golden Ring town is an escape for the eclectic entrepreneur, who founded one of Russia's most successful meat brands, a bookstore and a line of folk pottery.

But unlike the usual concept of a weekend getaway, Dymov goes there to be surrounded by people, not to escape from them.

The human factor always takes priority for Dymov, has served as a stable compass to guide him to new projects and is the personal quality that he credits most for his professional success.

Vadim Dymov

Education

1986-1988 – Suvorov Military College, Ussuriisk, Primorye region
1988-1991 – High Military Political College, Donetsk, Ukraine
1992-1999 – Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, law degree

Work experience

1991-1993 – Interior Ministry, lieutenant
1994 – Retired from military at the rank of senior lieutenant, started work as a judge's assistant in Vladivostok
1997 – Co-founded Ratimir meat-processing company with Alexander Trush
2001 – Founded Dymov sausage factory
2003 – Founded Dymov-Keramika
2006 – Founded Respublika bookstore chain
2007 – Co-founded Dymov No. 1 restaurant with Arkady Novikov
2011 – Expert council on small and medium-sized business in the Moscow city government, chairman
2012 – Central Federal District public chamber member

Favorite books: "Anna Karenina," "War and Peace" and "Sevastopol Sketches" by Leo Tolstoy; "The Aristos" and "The Magnus" by John Fowles
Reading now: The poetry of Anna Akhmatova
Favorite films: "Where the Buffalo Roam," directed by Art Linson; "Lawrence of Arabia," directed by David Lean; "Barry Lyndon," directed by Stanley Kubrick
Favorite restaurant: All restaurants by Arkady Novikov
Weekend getaway: "In Suzdal, I recharge my batteries, like a submarine."

"I like people," Dymov said in an interview. "I adore them. To be honest, I couldn't live without people, so all my projects, in one way or another, are connected to people."

He entertains his dacha guests with long philosophical conversations on the veranda, walking tours around the historic city and the occasional sample of his homemade plov.

Dymov, 42, has an air of informality not always found with former military men. His father was an officer serving in the Primorsky region when Dymov was born. His matriculation at Suvorov Military Academy was a given.

Having retired with the rank of senior lieutenant, he entered the burgeoning world of post-Soviet business by chance in 1997. A friend suggested they open a meat processing plant, which they called Ratimir. Four years later, Dymov launched his eponymous company, whose revenues reached $510 million in 2011. Despite the company's success, Dymov admits to being more passionate about the social aspect of eating than the food itself.

The importance of the people aspect is present in Dymov's other businesses. He founded the bookstore chain Respublika, where he sometimes works incognito as a cashier, the Moscow-based restaurant Dymov No. 1, which he opened with restaurateur Arkady Novikov, and a ceramic crafts factory in Suzdal.

Dymov's social nature even brought him close to entering politics. Once proposed as a candidate for governor of the region where he was born, Dymov decided to postpone any political career until he gains more life experience.

"I looked into what my goals are for the next five years," Dymov said. "And I set priorities, then numbered them all, looked at what is urgent and relevant and said, 'I am not interested in this, but I am interested in that and that.'"

Dymov added that he is already maturing. That means he will be more conservative when figuring out how many people to have over for New Year's celebrations in Suzdal, he said. So some of the 100 people who received invitations in the past may be out of luck.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What criteria do you use to select people for your team? How do you motivate them?

A: The first criteria: Does this person fit in? Is he one of us? Second: Is he reliable? This is also intuitive. The third measurement: Does he show promise? These are internal questions that you answer yourself. And the fourth important aspect is the person's competitiveness in one sphere or another. For this, there are tests and HR departments.

A very important aspect for people is motivation, both material and nonmaterial motivation. Nonmaterial is respect, relations, career growth, authority inside the company and reputation.

I have already discovered that money is not the main motivator in life for me. It is life among people, their attitude to me, my attitude toward them, reputation, which is based on some small achievements that can feed my ego. In short, I want to feel as if I haven't lived in vain and feel that I have helped society in some way, and at the same time, that society has responded to me and has also paid me with something — including profit.

I know a very good professor, and he once quoted a saying that made me drastically change my worldview. "I am lazy," I told him. He replied, "There are no lazy people." I said, "How is that possible? I am a lazy person." He said, "No, you're just not engrossed in what you're doing." When he said this, I thought that really, if something interests me a lot, I am willing to not sleep at night and to work on it.

Q: Do you see your ceramics production in Suzdal as a commercial enterprise or something designed to mostly benefit the local community?

A: It is unquestionably a community project because it allows people to work. We have about 40 people employed there. That means about 200 people live off those earnings. Two hundred people for Suzdal is a lot because the city is mostly made up of pensioners.

It also has a cultural significance. I was in Suzdal last week. I drove in and walked into a shop. Everywhere there were ceramics. I asked them, "What is this?" "This is Dymov," they replied. I told them, "No, it's not Dymov." They said, "Yes, it is Dymov." They don't know what I look like, but I can see, of course, that this is not our pottery. This counterfeiting is a sign of our success.

My wife got indignant and asked the cashier, "How can you sell this? It's dishonest." I told her, "Let it go. What's the harm? Let the people sell this." And then I told the cashier, "I am Dymov, and this is not our product." The cashier didn't even apologize. She was just a little shocked and a little afraid. She thought I was going to start yelling, but I asked, "Do the ceramics sell better this way?" She said yes, and I told her to go ahead. So the social aspect of the project has increased even more! I have created additional value of some kind that allows people to earn more.

Q: What would you recommend to someone who wants to start a community project?

A: In Russia, you must approach this very carefully and delicately. Why? Because Russia didn't have these institutions before. I am creating this institution, but I already have experience. I am Russian. It is easier for me. I know the local mentality. Americans, foreigners, they don't feel this. They sometimes mistakenly think that it is the same here as in America and try to bring over their standardized project version. This is not correct at all. If I went somewhere in the Middle East and tried to do there what I do here, it would be a fiasco. Same goes for America or France.

Q: What are Russia's strengths?

A: It's the people who live here, nothing more. It is people and historic memory. It's in the culture of the land.

For us, Maslow's hierarchy of human needs is different. For a Russian, the attraction to the land and to his past is very deep, and it exists regardless of which stage of life he is in. We need to remember this love for our land and heritage.

This is the task of the government. For what other purpose do we finance it? Why does it pump out so much oil if it does nothing in this regard? If we have oil, we want to live well. The question of effectiveness arises. People like me, who have earned the time to think with our heads, we start to ask questions. For this reason, some of us go into politics and some of us just continue to do our job well. Because of this, there are changes in the country.

I have no doubt that the Baltic states will return to us in the next 100 years and we'll be friends again, because if we look at the history of Russia over the past 500, 700, 1,000 years, we're similar people. We're neighbors.

I am very happy that television content has changed a lot. There is the television channel Kultura and a lot of history shows. A lot of interesting channels have emerged. What we had in the Soviet Union, when you lived with the understanding of who you are, what you are, where you are, that is coming back to us.

Russia is quickly moving ahead. At the same time, it is quickly coming back to its roots. I see a lot of potential, a lot of strength and a lot of energy. It is stronger than many think despite what is happening with the bureaucrats. There is now this feeling that we are going though a partial cleansing from all the corruption scandals. We have suffered through them, and now we are blowing off steam.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

I am interested in the history of World War II and Stalin's personality. We haven't completely evaluated his role. I am interested in Churchill if you're talking about foreigners. I am interested in the whole history of England. Napoleon interests me.

At one time, I spent a year learning about what he has done for the world, not for France, but for the whole of humanity. In my opinion, Napoleon is the person who had the biggest influence on the history of the whole modern civilization. He changed it completely, including us Russians because he fought us.

In America, I am interested in all the presidents, particularly the first five. The first three for sure. I attentively studied their contributions and think that they are great people, geniuses.

I even studied the history of chivalry. This made a great impression on me in youth and adulthood. It's very bad that in Russia there was no chivalry as it existed in Western Europe. Because of this, we didn't have a full-fledged renaissance.

Q: What should foreign businessmen know about working with Russians?

A: First, be sincere and be yourself. Don't wear masks. Second, know the cultural and historical context; this always brings a benefit. And third, just trust people.

The formula of successful partnership, whether in America, France, Canada, Armenia or Georgia, is the same. People value honest emotions. People value openness. People value respect and kindness, and people know how to work if they know what they're working for.

Russian people are very soulful. If you have a problem, you need to talk. People here understand more from the heart than from pragmatism. If you talk emotionally and openly, people will feel that.

I can't say that I like Americans better. They are very good at specializing, but it is merely an acquired habit. It's not a personal quality. I have been to New York, and Americans seemed very skilled to me in a given area. So if a guy is an electrician, he is a very good electrician. Just don't ask him about wine; he doesn't understand anything about wine.

Russians are well-versed in everything. They'll tell you everything. But in Western society, particularly in America as I have noticed, their knowledge is very compartmentalized.

This impressed me. It would probably be nice for Russians to be somewhere in the middle. To be overly specialized is also boring. Yes, let something fall and break. There must be some slip-ups, or life will become sterile.

Q: What is the essence of good leadership?

A: Leadership is when you show your leadership qualities and, most importantly, are not worried about your reputation and looking bad. You have nothing to hide from people.

Pseudoleadership is when a person says he has a lot of money and therefore he is a leader. But really, if you say that, you could just be a lucky dealmaker, and in Russia you could just be a crook. What we definitely need in Russia are real leaders.

Predominantly in Russia now, we have these phantom leaders who base their leadership on money and some other external factors. A person thinks he is a leader because he has some money and a place in society. Most likely, he hasn't earned his place in society by working in society but by having a position in the government or a state company.

Because of this, young people's priorities have also been skewed. At some point, young people thought that to be a bureaucrat is right, that this is leadership.

I think there is a deficit of leadership in the country. The outflow of leaders from the country — and there was a big one — has bled the nation. Until we create a new generation of these young, enterprising people who can be responsible for what they create, another 30, 40, 50 years will pass. In that regard, we have a slight gap, and we need to work on this.

Young people are wonderful. They're not rushing anywhere anymore. They like it here. They understand that they can get an education in the best institutes and universities of the world, but it's more comfortable for them to live in Russia because they feel that it is their native country, people here speak their language, they're similar in their identities and mentality because they grew up on this land. When you come here, you feel that this nature and this place is your place.

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