



# Magdalena Gerger

*If Magdalena Gerger were to give advice to anyone, it would be simple: Follow your heart. Do what you are passionate about and don't run after something just because everyone else is. Trust yourself and do what you love because, by definition, if you enjoy what you are doing, then you will also do it well.*



"I grew up in the North of Sweden on a tiny island called Frösön. My parents wanted six children; but after having four babies in five years, I think my older brother, me, my sister, and my youngest brother were probably enough. My parents made some kind of class journey, as higher education was so important."

Magdalena's mother graduated from university and worked as a high school sports teacher and with children who were physically challenged. Magdalena's father graduated from the Royal Institute of Technology and worked as an engineer and CEO.

"My parents also put their hearts into renovating. The six of us lived in a very small house, which they expanded, improved, and made into our home. Their gift was seeing the potential in anything, then transforming it into something they had always dreamed of."

Two partners who built things together from the ground up laid the solid foundation for Magdalena and her siblings.

"This made a deep impression on me. To this day, I cannot stop myself from spotting a gem, then imagining what it could become."

Nature was a vital part of Magdalena's upbringing. The ski hill next to her house was a focal part of her childhood.

“People from the north tend to be in tune with nature. My soul is more in the northern part of the world: the strength of character, the sturdy work ethic, and the independence inspires my heart.”

Sports was an important part of Magdalena’s childhood.

“Dad was athletic and Mom, even more so. Gymnastics and skiing were my life; I competed regionally in both. When I retired at sixteen, I fell in love with coaching.”

A natural born leader, Magdalena’s passion was leading and helping others to achieve their aspirations.

“Gymnastics is so great: it builds strength, determination, teamwork, and individual grace. My sister and I spent 40 hours a week training. When I came home, we just couldn’t help ourselves but continue. Dad turned our living room into a gym; I have only good memories!”

One memory for Magdalena is so vivid, it is as though it happened yesterday.

“We had the most fascinating exchange with the Junior Romanian team! Nadia Comăneci had already won the ’76 Olympic Games with four perfect 10s and was no longer with the team. But her coach Béla Károlyi was there. The gymnasts were all at the same athletic level: the Swedish girls were 16 years old; the Romanians were only 10!”

Magdalena was deeply impressed by their work ethic and stamina, but says one thing was devastating.

“These girls came from such poor families; they barely had any clothes. Meeting them certainly opened our eyes; it became so clear that they deserved all of what we had and so much more. I remember giving them all our clothes to take home with them. What an experience for a teenage girl; I am so grateful.”

Gymnastics taught Magdalena the amazing things people can achieve with hard work and dedication.

“That whole symbiosis and power of the team has stayed with me: If we work together, anything is possible.”

At 18, Magdalena graduated from high school. With so many interests it was difficult to narrow it down to just one.

“Should I teach? Am I meant for business? How about medicine? Will I be an engineer?”

Magdalena applied to the Stockholm School of Economics and the Royal Institute of Technology, but felt she was not ready yet.

“My father is half Austrian, so I went to Vienna where my relatives’ owned a vineyard. It was natural for me to branch out on my own and explore. Yes, I come from a small village, but I’ve always been curious. I rolled up my sleeves and went to work, in search of what really got my heart beating.”

Magdalena soon became a ski instructor and moved in with her two girlfriends. Soon, there was a new ski instructor in town ... David had just arrived from Canada.

“David decided to introduce himself. I heard the knock and opened the door. He says it was love at first sight. For me, I would say it took me a couple of weeks.”

Ever the rational one, Magdalena was apprehensive of getting close and having to say goodbye.

“There were many calls home: especially, to my mother: ‘I’ve fallen in love with this Canadian! What happens now?!’ I had been accepted into the Stockholm School of Economics and it was clear I would not be going to Canada or anywhere else.”

“We grew up a little faster than if we had been from the same country. There were some big life-changing decisions. I said: Come to Sweden and I will do everything I can to make you feel at home.”

After spending the summer with Magdalena and her family, David was ready to make the move. Everyone was so welcoming, particularly Magdalena’s mother. David immediately felt at home.

“When you have such borders between your home countries, you have to be stronger sooner and must commit yourself a little faster. That was both lovely and scary. When we hugged goodbye, it became clear to us that we couldn’t – and wouldn’t – be apart forever.”

David applied for a visa and the waiting began.

“Once I got to know Dave and met his friends, his family and his country, it was easy to fall in love with all of it. In fact, I haven’t yet found one aspect of Canada that I do not like. I just love it all!”

David says he is the luckiest man alive to have found Magdalena: determined, principled, loving, and adventurous – with both her feet firmly planted on the ground. David quickly found a job at Citibank while Magdalena embarked upon her studies at SSE.

“I came in quite open minded and the whole school appealed to me. It’s easy to be impressed when you don’t have any expectations.”

Magdalena speaks of being put into “toddler” groups where they organized and served dinner to the older students.



“That was fun. Our group had such helpful ‘parents.’ We’re all still friends! We go running and cross training together in the forest and have loved watching our children grow up.”

Magdalena acknowledges there was always an innate pressure to perform.

“I remember the first exam at SSE to assess our math level. I stood alone checking the numbers; my lip was trembling. The pressure and the loneliness was real, but the warmth from friends really helped.”

Magdalena thinks it was beneficial being slightly older. Her laid back nature also served her well.

“I came in totally relaxed. Some showed up at school in the perfect suit and tie. Perhaps it’s a question of personal character, but this never concerned me. I can proudly say: I chose my own way and I found my group of friends.

“During my career, of course, I’ve been in situations where someone has tried to degrade me: for example, by commenting on my clothes in the middle of a professional interview.”

But...

“You’re either a cultural architect or you’re a cultural prisoner, and I just won’t be held a prisoner to anyone.”

Magdalena is a woman who has never been defined by what others may think of her. On the other hand, she says there have been hardships and many difficulties along the way.

“When I started at SSE in 1986, a third of us were female. Very early on, many of us women formed a kind of alliance. We didn’t compete; we cooperated instead. I am lucky that my female friends have always shared the characteristic of sincere solidaritary. We encourage, support, and build up each other.”

The women took turns reading the books, then writing the summaries and sharing them with each other.

“We sensed that we were in this together. I have found along the way that teamwork among women is crucial. We are stronger if we support each other.”

Magdalena believes working while studying enhanced her SSE experience.

“As a junior helper at Coopers & Lybrand, I became the ‘Excel Queen’ and did their prep work and analysis. I was also the Secretary of the International Student Council and organized the International MBA Exchange.”

In her third year, Magdalena went on the exchange to McGill University in Montréal.

“I hung out with David’s grandmother, father and all of his cousins, while he was living and working in Sweden. He came to visit me in Canada twice!”

Magdalena’s warmth shines through. In spite of being determined and values-driven, she is also generous and kind with that silent “Northern Sweden” resolve. She describes how, as everyone sought internships, things got a bit competitive at SSE. But she never let this get her down.

“I chose the international economy program and met some great people. I wrote my thesis together with a fellow student about a Costa Rican bamboo project: solving the deforestation and economic problems by building bamboo houses.”

David moved to London with work, and Magdalena joined him six months later.

“I thought I would land one of the management consultancy jobs, but the queue was very long. This was a big disappointment. I pounded the pavement in London instead and was finally hired by a small firm called Cadogan Management, which turned out to be wonderful. My first project was launching Häagen-Dazs in Europe.”

Six months into the project, Häagen-Dazs hired the consultant.

“I set up offices all over Europe. I fell in love with this all-natural adult ice cream and led the mission to see if the rest of Europe felt the same.”

Magdalena and David were married, six years after they met.

“Things in our lives have always been quite slow. In the end, we decided to bring together all the people who mattered to us to celebrate in Hudiksvall, close to where I grew up. It was one of the best things we’ve ever done.”

Magdalena and David were together another six years before they had a child.

“We always knew we wanted children, but we were pretty busy. I spent a lot of time working, which I’ve always loved. Those first 12 years as a couple were wonderful for us to really create a life together. Nice and slow. When we finally did have children, it was fantastic.”

Magdalena accepted the position of Marketing Director at Tambrands UK/Ireland – soon to be Procter & Gamble: her first leadership role managing a team.

“Our son was born in 1998 and, as much as I enjoyed my work, there wasn’t much space to be home with him. Meanwhile, it was turbulent at work with P&G acquiring the company, so I left.”

Magdalena was soon hired by ICI Paints, which really spoke to her creative side. Two years later, Nestlé headhunted her to be the UK Category Manager of Nescafé retail coffee.

“Working in the business role with innovation, product development, and branding was exciting: a team journey of reinventing coffee. I later became pregnant with our second child, a daughter, and I negotiated a four-month maternity leave.”



Magdalena and David followed in her parents' footsteps by renovating their first house: a classic Victorian.

"It was really falling apart, but we lovingly transformed it. We did it again, in Wimbledon."

At the height of the Northern Ireland conflict, Magdalena says it was sometimes quite traumatic to live in London. The building next to Dave's work was actually bombed once.

"I really felt it came just too close. We asked ourselves if our children should not grow up in a way that resembles David's childhood in Canada or mine in Sweden instead?"

Then 9/11 happened.

"David had only just got off the phone with his colleague who was working on the 52nd floor."

That experience forever changed Magdalena and David.

"It is hard to explain it. We were devastated and mesmerized – at the same time. We kept saying: 'Let's just move to Sweden and be with our kids'. From that moment, we walked back toward another kind of existence."

Oscar was six and Elise was two. Raising them in Sweden was exciting and challenging at the same time.

"I took a year off just to be with them; then, when my year was done, Dave started his. Reconnecting in Sweden felt natural, as life brought me back to continue my career in the city where the seeds of my education were first sown. Upon my return, I approached Ingvar Kamprad, founder of IKEA, and expressed my interest in being on the IKEA board. Once on the pay roll, he suggested a four-week process where I worked full time on the shop floor, sorting products and becoming better acquainted with IKEA's core values. It was fantastic."

Almost decades younger than her fellow board members, Magdalena was the first – and the only – woman on the IKEA board. Her first board meeting was pivotal since the plan was a traditional pre-dinner sauna.

"I told the rest of the board that I wouldn't feel so included if they went ahead with that tradition. Then I suggested they join me in coming up with a new alternative. Otherwise, I would just quietly read my book."

When Magdalena speaks her mind in a way that is non-threatening and from the heart, she finds that people are willing to listen.

"My sense is the rest of the board almost gained a new respect for me because I calmly told them how I felt. We did create a new tradition. The bonding I felt with the IKEA team was immediate."

Magdalena soon became the Director of Marketing and Innovation at Swedish dairy cooperative Arla, where she stayed for five years.



“We had one foot in farming policies and one foot in a fast-moving consumer goods company selling milk and yoghurt, and so on. It was romantic to meet and work with the farmers. My children still remember visiting the cows.”

In 2009, Magdalena was headhunted to lead Systembolaget: the state-owned Swedish retailer of wines, beers, and spirits.

“They wanted a CEO with a modern leadership style who also had experience working close to consumers. I was drawn to this well-managed business, which also had potential.”

After 12 years as CEO of Systembolaget, Magdalena stepped down in 2022 knowing she has, indeed, made a difference in the lives of Swedes. Systembolaget is considered the most trusted institution in Sweden, before the Swedish Church, IKEA and the royal family. In her ever-modest way, Magdalena is reluctant to accept all of the credit.

“It’s always the efforts and the success of the team: building from scratch, nurturing the brand, and establishing a reputation based on quality values that actually does something for people. This is my career love affair to date.”

Magdalena’s future looks as dynamic as her life has always been, with a host of non-executive roles on many different boards: Nefab, Investor, PEAB, and an advisory role for Volkswagen Group’s International Sustainability Council. Creating things together with others has always given her so much.

“My parents’ and grand parents’ values are deeply ingrained in me: building things from the bottom up. I learned their grassroots approach: cultivating in the garden, leading a team, and running a business. You roll up your sleeves and you get the job done. I truly believe in hard work; things don’t just happen easily. They never did for me. I didn’t have the name, the suit or the look. But I did it my way and have loved every single second of it.”

“This has given me fruit again and again.”