

“Love Letter” to Romania

An American and a Romanian are leading strategy and leadership classes for big companies in America and are working hard on a unique project: a little encyclopedia of... Romanian Wisdom

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For Matthew Cross, many roads are leading to Romania. He realized this recently, even though many moments in his career contributed, each in its own time, to the same conclusion. Until the whole picture started coming into focus, all of his experiences didn't seem to have a clear connection to one another. The first one took place in the early 1990's, when Matthew started studying the ideas of quality management, which helped Japan rise to become a world-leading economic power after the disaster of World War II. The concept is simple: if a company is focused on creating loyal customers through an integrated, systemic approach and each employee is empowered and properly trained by top management, the quality of the final product or service and the efficiency of the whole organization will be much higher and the results, statistically proven, net superior. Behind these clear principles and numbers were two quality management pioneers—Dr. W. Edwards Deming and Joseph M. Juran—the second originally from Braila, Romania.

“They opened my eyes,” remembers Matthew—“towards another way of working with people.” Until then Matthew was part of many corporations with complicated hierarchies and

draconian procedures, where creativity and freedom of expression weren't honored as strengths. He founded a company for the marketing and promotion of credit cards in America, a fact that makes Matthew feel responsible even now, jokingly or not, for at least a half a billion dollars in consumer debt. “I was successful and doing well, but I wished to be more than just a wheel in the

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system.” The ideas of quality management, pioneered by Deming and Juran, made Matthew determined to go back to the drawing board and change his field completely. In just one year, Matthew left behind the credit card business and became a senior partner in a management consultancy firm. In the late 1990's he was already the president of Leadership Alliance, a firm that works with Fortune 100 companies in America. The first big client in his

portfolio was Bank of America, who came to him through a delighted client. Allianz, UBS, Citigroup and Smith Barney followed, and the rest came one after the other, because Matthew doesn't believe in marketing or advertising in the traditional sense, only in a job well done which leads to enthusiastic referrals.

The name of his company—Leadership Alliance—was carefully chosen. “In general, leaders are seen as Lone Rangers who don't form alliances except in tough times,” explains Matthew, a passionate student of history. Through the mash-up of these two apparently opposite concepts—Leadership and Alliance—Matthew set out to create a new paradigm: based on Deming's and Juran's theories, each person who contributes to the making of a final product or service can be a leader in his job and experience joy and pride in their work. The true leader supports all employees to become leaders for the benefit of the whole enterprise. The Lone Ranger has to become a team player.

In 2008 the American met Diana Doroftei, originally from Barlad, Romania who became a partner in the Alliance. Her way of thinking was provocative to Matthew because it was very Eastern European, in both a good and a challenging way.



Matthew Cross and
Diana Doroftei.

Photo: BOGDAN RUSU

“We Romanians are very self-judgmental and set in our ways. It is very hard for us to take responsibility and change things around us,” said Diana. “We do not realize that each of us lives the life that we choose.” “There you go,” says Matthew, smiling. “You live the life that you choose—in America, this saying would be printed on a T-shirt and would be sold on the street corners.” Such sayings with seeds of truth in them inspired them to write a book which brings together the essence of Romanian wisdom, which is seen by many Romanians as insignificant, but which, for Americans is thought-provoking, interesting and most of all, marketable. Exactly like the T-shirt idea, that is when Matthew saw the whole picture. “As an American, I’ve heard of Edward G. Robinson, Johnny Weissmuller (the original Tarzan), Joseph M. Juran and other Romanian personalities who have made extraor-

inary contributions to the world, although most Romanians have never heard of them.” That is when *The Little Book of Romanian Wisdom* was born. The book brings together quotes and pearls of wisdom of Romanian personalities and thoughts from everyday citizens.

The book’s ideal comes from what Americans call common sense: that authentic wisdom comes from everyday citizens, as much as from society’s leaders. Diana and Matthew convinced themselves of the need for such a book after a few months spent in Iasi and Bucharest, Romania; especially after

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Matthew noticed how Romanians find it easier to talk about the negative instead of the positive when it came to their country. “Romanians are not using the word ‘love’ very often, only in truly special moments,” says Matthew, smiling, “while we Americans are using it everyday for everything under the sun.”

Matthew then became serious, a sign that what he was about to say was especially meaningful to him. “For this exact reason, what we are doing with this book is a *Love Letter to Romania*,” he explains, in a combination of English and Romanian. “Romania is a country with roots that go back thousands of years, while America is not even 250 years old.” Even so, most Americans wouldn’t be able to find Romania on a map. Through *The Little Book of Romanian Wisdom*, launched this fall, Diana and Matthew hope to change this.



Interestingly enough, the two of them weren't concerned about the perception of the book by Americans, they are instead concerned about how it will be received by Romanians, given the fact that the book is featured in both languages. "Initially, we were thinking of how Romanians would criticize us and the book," said Diana, laughing. She knows better than Matthew about the principles of Romanian gossip and critique, yet she believes until the end in their initia-

become leaders in their field, how they can make their work more efficient, or what they can do to insert the values of the company into their everyday work," explains Matthew. Each participant surfaces multiple issues and all—regardless of the number—are written on Post-It notes. That is when the real work begins: the issues that have things in common are put into buckets. Through the Hoshin process, which can last for hours or even a day or two, the priorities become clear and the participants are often amazed by

The initial Apple software operating system created by co-founder Steve Wozniak utilized the Fibonacci Sequence in its design.

tive. "If only one person looks at Romania differently after reading this book, we would consider it a success."

Diana understands from her own experience as an immigrant to America that you cannot truly value yourself unless you value your place of origin. "I have a saying: to be the architect of your destiny, you have to be a student of your history," said Matthew.

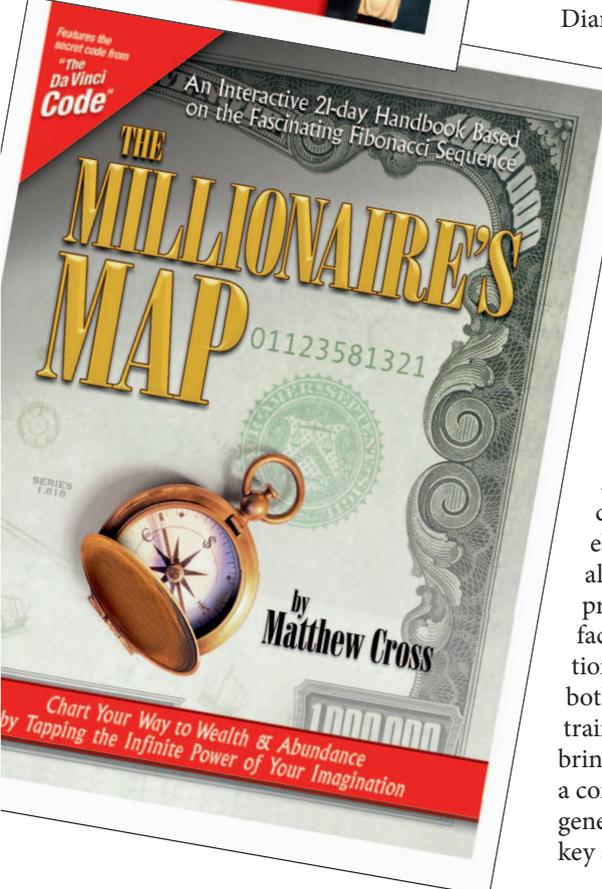
The principle doesn't come only from their personal beliefs, but from a process called Hoshin as well, which was inspired by Dr. Deming and which they use in their work with successful American companies. Hoshin focuses on the so-called "foundation elements," essential for achieving all desired results. The aim: logical prioritization of all critical success factors distilled into a sequenced action plan. In Japanese, Hoshin means both Compass and North Star and the trainings offered by their firm typically bring together 15 or so leaders from a company. Everything starts with a general question, which represents the key aim of the company. "How they can

the results. "Their activity as a team becomes more coherent and focused," explains Matthew.

After the team Hoshin, people can repeat the process to gain clarity and alignment on their personal priorities. The Pareto Principle contributes to the success of this process, through which 80% of the results come from only 20% of the actions. "Nowadays, we can even notice that 5 or 10% more focus in your life and business can bring you 90 to 95% of your desired outcomes, helping our evolution from one level to another," adds Matthew.

Sometimes it's not easy to convince an army of extremely busy, stressed, skeptical professionals to accept these principles of prioritization, re-evaluation of values and an upgrade of work-life balance. Quantum physics helps them in their mission, because science is beginning to support the principles they teach, including those on positive thinking and the increased energy and momentum, which results when focusing a large part of our thoughts and strengths on the right priorities.

"We speak the language of our business clients, that of numbers and concrete results," explains Matthew.



“When they see that these principles are working on their specific aims, we can explain to them easily the principles of work-life balance.” In their field—consultancy—the economic crisis surprisingly didn’t have a negative impact; instead, it opened the minds of many executives in big corporations. “They realized that the logic that they were focusing on all this time was wrong and that they have to change something in both themselves and their companies.”

Even so, there are still moments when their work becomes a difficult process of “knocking on a closed door.” This was the case in a seminar led for the largest division of Bank of America, where one member of the leadership team had an attitude somewhat reminiscent of Scrooge.

His top priorities were centered on increasing profitability and efficiency; happiness and joy in work being trivial pursuits in his view. After going through the Hoshin process, the team decided

on a short list of key priorities to implement in their long-term strategy. The first priority was a clear code of team values—with joy in work being among the most important. “Scrooge” fought the idea tooth and nail at first, yet in the end, “the other members of the team nominated him to be the lead ambassador for, you guessed it, joy in work,” remembers Matthew. After several months in this role, “Scrooge” came to Matthew and thanked him. “He told me that after applying the Hoshin principles, he was more relaxed, he was spending more productive time with his team and he overcame his limited beliefs that

work can be done only one way.” Many times resistance is not something bad, but more a sign that indicates the steps to a higher professional level. Matthew believes that “if you’re not encountering resistance, you’re not leading.”

Prometheus’ Promise

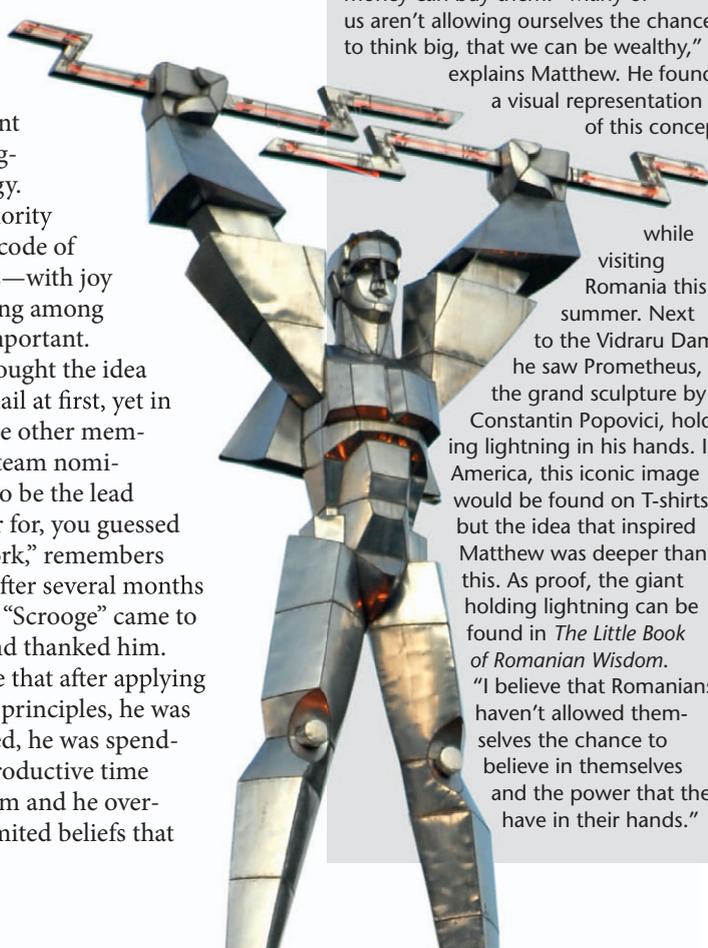
One of the bestsellers published along the way by Matthew is named *The Millionaire’s Map*. It is based on a stimulating exercise to expand your mind’s capacity to envision and attract greater abundance: over the course of 21 days you spend, in your imagination, a certain amount of money which directly correlates with the Fibonacci Sequence. Because each number in the sequence is the combined amount of the previous two, you spend on the first day \$100, second day \$100, third day \$200, fourth day \$300 and so on, until you reach 21 days. The aim of this exercise is to open your mind to prosperity, starting with the idea that people are not wanting money of and in itself, but what the money can buy them. “Many of us aren’t allowing ourselves the chance to think big, that we can be wealthy,”

explains Matthew. He found a visual representation of this concept

while visiting Romania this summer. Next to the Vidraru Dam he saw Prometheus, the grand sculpture by Constantin Popovici, holding lightning in his hands. In America, this iconic image would be found on T-shirts, but the idea that inspired Matthew was deeper than this. As proof, the giant holding lightning can be found in *The Little Book of Romanian Wisdom*. “I believe that Romanians haven’t allowed themselves the chance to believe in themselves and the power that they have in their hands.”

After speaking about many victories in leading teams to higher performance, and finishing *The Little Book of Romanian Wisdom*, I discovered another of Matthew’s life-long “passions”—the Golden Ratio/Fibonacci Sequence. This led to a collaboration with a famous Romanian based in America, natural beauty expert Anastasia Soare, on a book about the proportion of beauty, based on the Golden Ratio, “the architectural design code of the universe.” Matthew has written four successful books, starting with the Fibonacci Sequence and its application to business and lifestyle. Through connecting with Steve Wozniak, co-founder of Apple Inc., he discovered that the initial software of Apple’s operating system was optimized in part through the application of the Fibonacci Sequence. “It is a principle of efficiency: minimum steps for maximum results. This is valuable in software, business and life in general.”

At our interview, which took place in Pipera, Bucharest, the two of them came by streetcar. Dressed in a suit and tie, Matthew hopped on a public transportation system to “savor” the real life in Bucharest, and his experience didn’t disappoint him. On the contrary, while enroute he was approached by a Romanian who surprised him by asking, in impeccable English, “You’re on a mission, aren’t you?” Remembering the moment, Matthew and Diana started laughing. “He sensed something,” said Diana. Taking into consideration that in Matthew’s briefcase was a copy of *The Little Book of Romanian Wisdom*, their “love letter” to Romania, the streetcar passenger was right on the money. The American in Bucharest was truly on a mission.



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