



## **We Are Vodafone - Episode 7**

Transcript

### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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### **HOST**

Tim Samuels

### **GUESTS**

Plamena Panova-Omanovic

#### **Tim Samuels 00:06**

Welcome to the second series of 'We are Vodafone', a podcast that's about people who work at Vodafone and that's for everyone to listen to. I'm Tim Samuels, a documentary maker, and broadcaster. This series is all about your stories, about opening up and diving into the lives, passions, fears, successes, and opinions of people from all parts of the organisation. Talking about subjects, which can be taboo, like sudden bereavement, and how to draw the positives from something as overwhelming as grief. That's what Plamena Panova-Omanovic wanted to talk about in this episode. Plamena came to the UK from Bulgaria, via Spain, to work at Vodafone alongside her husband, Ennis. She's now an analytics manager with Vodafone Business. I began our conversation by asking her to tell the story of how she and Ennis first met.

#### **Plamena Panova-Omanovic 01:06**

As I always tell the story, we started arguing on work related topics of how to do things. And then over time we found out that we can argue on other topics as well. Yeah, we started talking like, very quickly talking, okay, let's start living together. Let's give it a try. Let's figure it out.

#### **Tim Samuels 01:23**

It's quite a leap to move in with someone so soon, what was it about him and his character that drew you in?

#### **Plamena Panova-Omanovic 01:28**

He was one of those people that lit up the room, he would be extremely talented in anything that he does. Everything was sort of easy for him and he was naturally good in whatever he would pick up or at least like that's what you see on the surface. And then his way of thinking and he was very interesting mixture of different cultures. His mother is from Spain, his father is Bosnian. They both met in Switzerland and he was born and raised in Switzerland. He was a very interesting person and just generally talented. He was a very, 'let's do it' person. Come on, let's do it. Let's do that. Let's try this. Let's do the other way. I was on the side of okay, let's sit down. Let's talk it through. Let's think about it. Let's make what if this or the other, we could have a good time just being the two of us at home or elsewhere or travelling or not and we had the same style. When it comes to travel this Russia flight. Let's go see everything like we have 48 hours here. What can we do?

#### **Tim Samuels 02:31**

And how long after living together did you decide to get married?



**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 02:35**

Two years, something later? People have asked me many times, how did he propose? And I'm always saying like, well, there wasn't necessarily a proposal, we knew we're going to do it. It was more about let's pick a date. I mean, I'm not saying that our relationship didn't have these ups and downs. But for us, it wasn't a question of shall we, shall we not do, it was more like when?

**Tim Samuels 03:00**

So let's take stock of where life was in 2019? Where are you and Ennis living? And where are you both working?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 03:07**

When we decided to get married, we were still living in Spain. So, in that year, Ennis received an offer from Vodafone from a contractor to become a permanent. And the offer came with, but you have to move countries. And I said, Okay. We took the decision to move to the UK determined he was a technical project manager for one of Vodafone products that is very, very important within the Africa markets, and that's the M-PESA product. M-PESA is a payment solution that allows people without any bank account to administer payments, just by the power of having a SIM card. Thanks to this product and the decision of the government to use it, in some countries people for first time have received their salary in full. That was and still is one of the best things that Vodafone came up with not just for the company, but I would say for the people there.

**Tim Samuels 04:08**

So, Ennis is working on this. And he's offered a full time job and that's going to be what, here in the UK?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 04:14**

Yeah, it came with the condition that he has to move to UK. And I said, well, okay, but I'm like, what if I find a job in the same company or even in the same location? Like I found myself a job in Vodafone in in the same locations. So, we were then like one of those like Vodafone families. That is not unusual. So yeah, I started working for Vodafone. So, in 2019, I would say we were well established and familiar with the company we were living since quite a few years in UK then in between we managed to convince my oldest brother that moving to UK is a right like it's the right move. He and his wife and their little baby, they moved to UK and actually 2019, we were all living together, we share a place till they establish. So, in 2019, I had family around. We were both working for the same company, fairly happy with the work.

**Tim Samuels 05:17**

And then Ennis goes on a on a work trip. Where does he go to?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 05:20**

Usually, January, February time, he would do a longer trip to Africa. So first he was in South Africa, in Cape Town. And then he went to Mozambique for a couple of extra days. He shared a deep connection with Mozambique, and he enjoyed the place, and he has been many times before. The trip was going great. Yeah, we were talking about maybe the possibility to move to a different country and why not try one of those places. So, he was definitely like loving it within Cape Town. On the weekend, I think on Sunday, he had travelled from Cape Town to Maputo, which is not the best experience. And there were some delays so that on Sunday afternoon didn't feel great for him. He was saying I'm tired. Then Monday morning, he would be back up and running straight to the office. That was his element. Everybody will say oh, he was like his usual happy walk to the office.



So, we spoke up a couple of times throughout the day messaging, phone calls and so on. And then in the afternoon, he said, well, I think I'm going to go early to the hotel. I feel tired now like those, this travelling yesterday definitely had the effect on me. To which I responded, okay, go have some rest. And we speak later. Later that evening, I dropped the message of how are you? I assume you're sleeping. I could understand why he's not responding much later. Like I sent another message with 'hope you're alright'. 'Ping me when you wake up tomorrow morning, even if it's early, wake me up. I'm going to the office so it wouldn't be too early.' Then next morning, I woke up an hour earlier than I would for going to work and I checked my phone and there was no message back. Like I waited another hour, nothing back. I called back. No response. I'm like, okay, maybe he's in the shower. I'll give it another half an hour, like and then very shortly afterwards, his phone was switched off. So, I took it off. He's out of battery. And then because in the past couple days, I wasn't feeling too well like caught a cold or something. So, I decided, okay, today, again, I'll work from home, then this kind of starts to build up like why he's not responding to what's happening. The panic starts to grow, and the concern but trying not to indulge it. Okay, let's wait a little bit more. But wait for how long? So, I started pinging here and there, colleagues asking like, 'Do you know his schedule for the day? When do you think he should be online?' He was tired yesterday. But like, you should log in at some point because he absolutely loved his job. So, he wouldn't miss it in that morning, I ask a couple of people, they told me yes, there will be this important meeting at 10 o'clock. Yet you should log in. But he didn't. So, I started going through contacts like figuring out who of the guys in Maputo I know, to understand if he's the right guy, pick somebody else there. And he said, 'Let me check. No, he's not here'. And I'm like, 'what is the hotel when you were nearby? Like, what's the number like, can you check?' Then, like I entered into this weird period of something is is not right. Like I know it. What is it and how much to finally there was this full blackout like nobody was responding. One by one, like they go offline. And till I heard the doorbell ringing and thinking to myself, Oh, that one is working again. When I went to the door, there was my line manager looking at me with humongous huge eyes, really, really wide open and one other person, which turned out to be somebody from HR coming to tell me that he has been found in his hotel room, not breathing. And that they're terribly sorry, it took them a while to decide who and how to tell me and they went through, like a weird period of figuring out where I am. Like, am I in the office? Am I at home, and so on. That's what has happened and so far it seems like what the police have told them is that maybe he had something like a heart attack because they just found him in his bed later when I read through the documents, well, basically he seems like he had he suffered through some kind of clogging in his lungs and embolism, and probably that would either had happened while he was sleeping or when he was waking up. Because of him being a foreigner in a hotel room and so on, it wasn't that simple and easy just to go and lock the door when he's not responding. It took them a while to gain access in the right legal way, like gain access to the room and then figure out how to tell me, who is supposed to tell me?

**Tim Samuels 10:30**

What an extraordinary call to have your line manager turning up at your house saying that your young husband, but how old was he at the time?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 10:38**

Let me calculate it. He was he was 46.

**Tim Samuels 10:41**

I mean, it must have been must have been impossible for you to process what you've just been told.

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 10:48**



Oh, yeah, on many different levels. That scenario didn't went through my head. Like I went through all these other different scenarios thinking, what if y may be a car hit him, and he's somewhere in the hospital, and people don't know who he is, or whatever, like, but never thought that? This is what they're going to come and tell me. But it was such an extraordinary, strange and weird moment where we are then extraordinary and terrifying moment, I would say.

**Tim Samuels 11:18**

What were your initial thoughts?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 11:20**

I think it was somewhere around among the lines of why I didn't insist last night like of calling him not just sending messages, not even thinking that that will change anything, but it was more about I would have loved to speak again with him one more time. And second, almost instant thought was like, I have to go tell his parents now. How am I going to do that? And I felt like I should do that. At that time, I called his sister. She turned out that she was in Spain. And his Mom was in Spain. So I called them there. And told them, the worst thing you can tell anybody.

**Tim Samuels 12:05**

And I guess, you know, it was such a bolt from the blue, you know, so unexpected. How, how long? Did you feel that you were in a daze for it? How many days did you just feel disconnected?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 12:15**

I can tell because one of the things that happened, I've asked like, 'can I go there?' The company agreed. And I said well can I bring his sister along, I just sprang into action fairly quickly. It took them a day or two to organise the whole trip. I was this kind of in and out of action, or like, this is real, this is not real, I'm dealing with things that makes it real and the same time, don't want it to be real, you would do anything you would give anything to not to be real. I don't know what made it more real. Maybe when we when we landed in Maputo, when we asked to go and see him, maybe that made it to an extent more real, but still, I don't know for for how long, I was ready to wake up tomorrow and just be able just a bad dream. And then at the same time you wake up, it's not a bad dream, there are certain things that should be done. This situation is not exactly simple. We're foreigners and immigrants here in UK and then being in another country and something like that happened. And the situation wasn't that I had to necessarily do something. It was more like me wanting to be involved. Going to bed with the hope that okay, that will be just a bad dream. And then next morning, you wake up and then it's like, Okay, let's go this person, go sort out that thing. How are we progressing with this or the other?

**Tim Samuels 13:44**

So what support are you getting at the time maybe from from friends and from work as well?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 13:48**

Some from work, it was all brilliant. At any point I haven't been left alone, I have to say that. That was the moment I started feeling how the wheels of the big companies company are moving like I can sense that. I was the subject of this 5pm call every day of everything, including me because I work for the same company, when it comes to me and Ennis like nothing is exactly simple and straightforward. That was our theme in the life together. But I came across amazing people that can be human and can approach you like a person and deal with everything. And I would even deal with you as being a person. That was a moment when I thought to myself about how like we all are when



we work in those big corporations, we always think of ourselves as a number on a spreadsheet. At that very moment, I turned into a person and I was surrounded by persons the humans and the managing director of the company, the head of security, this amazing big guy. Antonio, they were absolutely there for me like for anything I want or I don't want they can endure like me one day shouting like crazy in the middle of a five star hotel and on the next day being too business like with my notebook with my questions.

**Tim Samuels 15:06**

In terms of your reaction, you know, you come across as as a sort of very organised person. But of course, none of us know how we're going to react when it comes to something like sudden grief. Were you surprised at your reaction at all?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 15:18**

I did not have time to think about this, you get into the doing. I'm blessed with a great support network, like I spoke about the company, but like, I have to talk about like, my family as well of strong people. Each and every one of them could give me what I need when I need it. It's not to support but this kind of like grounding, we need you. You have to get through it. Talk it through, tell me everything. What worries you, what doesn't worry you, we want you, we need you, my brother, my sister, and my sister in law, they came and met me in Spain, where we decided to place him to rest. I was blessed in having this amazing support network. So I will have them by my side when I need them, and when I don't need them. Because that's also like useful from time to time, somebody to get you out of the situation. But also the time having in Mozambique like Antonio, God bless him, this amazing person, he's leading the security team there, amazing person with a great big heart, great ability for compassion. Maybe I didn't realise it at the time, but then later had this evidence that when something like that happens, they are amazing people like great humans around us, they will show up when we need them.

**Tim Samuels 16:41**

From people I know who've been through things like this more recently, they say actually, the hardest part is everyone rallies at the beginning, and you have people around you, but it's a few weeks, it's a few months later, when people go back to their jobs and they go back to their lives, did you find it, it was sort of harder afterwards?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 16:59**

Sort of, there is a moment afterwards, it is a very messy period, nobody can tell you how long it will last. Things come down in terms of you have nothing to do then you start seeing how people respond differently. A lot of people, they might take a step back, because they're worried that they will not say the right thing. A lot of people will take a step back, because you made them think of 'what if this happens to me?'. A lot of people feel like they go through, 'oh, I have those in those problems, nothing to compare to yours'. So I will not come to you. The other element is that you enter into a different type of messy period. One day I may shout like crazy? Like on the next day? I would be absolutely normal, whatever normal means. One day I'll be I could be crying for hours, on the next day laughing like, nothing happened. That's part of it. Some of them, like that scares them, like, 'what shall I do? Right? Shall I tell you? How should I approach you?'

**Tim Samuels 18:09**

Looking back in retrospect, what do you want from people at the time? What do you want from friends? Do you want them to talk about their boring lives and their small problems? Do you just kind of want them to be there? Do you want them to not feel embarrassed?



**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 18:21**

I would say that yeah, not feel embarrassed and not feel worried or scared or something like that. It is true that if you catch me on a bad day, I may respond badly. Okay, so there is a risk. And if you catch me on a good day, it will be great. But you might catch me on a semi day, that will push it into a good day. I will never forget one of my colleagues, God bless him James with a big heart. He wears it in his sleeve. I remember one day a couple of months after talking about like the work his aspirations career, this next role is not coming. And it's important for him so he can move closer to work, his girlfriend in tears and all these kind of things. And he's, he's somewhere in between disappointed and sad and so on. And I'm talking with him and he's sharing. And at the same time, he's like, I feel guilty, because this is nothing to compare to what you're going through. That was the thing that pushed it from a bad day to a good day. Because yes, somebody is suffering with you in a completely different way. The whole point that he feels guilty about like his problem not being as big as mine. God bless him. So there is always a risk, nowadays not so much, but at the time there is a risk that you might come to me with your small problems and I might push you away, so, but the bigger chances, like just be as you are because you're going through a loss already. You don't want to lose more people, for whatever reason, the worst one being because somebody is afraid. We very rarely talk about how you go through loss. People don't know how to react like you don't have to react, be yourself because the other person is trying to figure out as well. Like what 'be yourself means'.

**Tim Samuels 20:09**

Plamena, in terms of sort of life going on, around eight months, I think after Ennis died, you decided to go do a volcanic track in Iceland. What was your thinking?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 20:21**

I was following Vodafone Foundation, since a while, like first announcement, are we gonna have those big epic challenges? Because at the time, that was back in 2018, I was thinking like, that's something totally that we can do together, it will be brilliant. Months later, when the, again the notification came with, we're doing the Icelandic trek. I thought to myself, I should still do it. I could do it for him. But also when I read what the cause was, the girl funds supporting girls, women when they are in need. I felt like I want to be part of it. I'm lucky of having amazing people around me to give me a hand. If I can do something, to create this chance for somebody else to get help, when they need it. Why should I not do it?

**Tim Samuels 21:13**

And what was it like for you? When you were you were on that walk in that amazing scenery?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 21:18**

The first day for everyone except me, it was absolutely brilliant. We went to this amazing waterfall, for everybody was amazing. For me, it was here I'm not doing it with the person I want to do it. That moment. I start thinking like, what was I thinking like, maybe I'm trying too soon, maybe I should have waited like I'm not ready yet. That first evening, we're in the hut, somewhere in the middle of nowhere. And this lady, she approached me with 'what's happening?' here is where like, those miracles happen, like you receive what you need. Because that was an amazing woman that have went through the sort of same loss some years earlier, she could be there to relate to everything that's happening with me be there just to listen, or tell me a couple of useful advices. And as we went talking in the next days, it was amazing like how many common elements we had, a lot of like background history, family experiences, and so on. It was because I opened up but because



somebody approached me without the fear. You see it in their eyes like that person is crying, what should I do in her eyes, there was none of this.

**Tim Samuels 22:37**

When it came to the end of the track, were you feeling in a different place?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 22:40**

Differently. It was like I was so like, so happy that I did it. I felt like I created an opportunity where like the universe can come and help me, even til the next days were much more physically demanding. That was more like I would say more motivating because I've had somebody to share with somebody to be there. For me, listening cannot bail out when it starts to get difficult. I got what I needed when I need it.

**Tim Samuels 23:08**

So Plamena, we're more than three years now since Ennis' death. How are you doing?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 23:15**

I'm doing all right. There is enough time exploration of grief and pain and sadness. There isn't a timeline like you stay three months at home and then you wake up on the next day and everything is easier. No, I went through all those processes at first, just one step at a time, not even making plans for tomorrow. I'm at the stage of full acceptance, that this is part of me. This is not something you can move on from you move with, I'm open to see what life has to offer.

**Tim Samuels 23:49**

What do you wish you knew, at the beginning that you know now?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 23:54**

That you shouldn't fight it. It took me a couple of months to realise it. And then there was this, listen to this interview, this conversation with Elizabeth Gilbert. She's sharing her experience with grief, that this is not something you can manage. When it happens, it happens, when it's done, you do the next thing, you cannot manage it, you cannot schedule it, you cannot push it for later. And most importantly, you shouldn't. I had the great support and understanding of my manager and my team that I might disappear for a couple of hours. That's the moment when when it hits me, the only one should do is make sure that you don't stay in it. Whatever it is we go do it, experience it, cry for whatever many days or not, go to remote places or don't, but we need you and a life goes on. Sort of. You will always carry this sadness in you, okay, or sadness or you will always carry this loss with you. But life will continue.

**Tim Samuels 25:01**

I believe that you've, you've come up with learnings, which you've now taken back to work for how they have a process for people who might end up in a similar situation.

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 25:11**

Yeah sort of, but the other thing I've learned is that, especially in like those first couple of months, you have to trust how you feel. Your life is no longer there, or it is but not exactly. The best you can do is go with what you feel tomorrow, you might feel it differently. Ten years later, you look at it, you think I did the right thing. 20 years passes, and then you look at it 'oh, I was wrong'. Like you never know. Like, the bill always comes at the end. But that is this much later.





**Tim Samuels 25:41**

I wonder whether now that those initial waves of grief have passed, when you think about Ennis do you think more about the sort of the good times and fond memories? And is there a particular time with Ennis or moment with Ennis that keeps coming back to you?

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 25:56**

It's his spirit, his spirit of can do, don't overthink it. I said it at the beginning. He was the project manager that thinks that like nine women can deliver one baby within a month. There are countless numbers of memories, good and bad and said there isn't a rule that only the good memories come back. But I think it's more the the can do spirit, like give it a try. But like, Okay, let's do it. Let's do it. Are you analysing it again? How long that will take and so on? I think that's what comes to me the most. I mean, I was always saying Ennis I'm like you are always in the rush. Where are you rushing for? What's the rush? Like we have time, but the reality is not that we don't have time. I mean, there is no way of telling it's more about don't overthink things. And if you can do them now do them now that but I repeat myself because he's not. He's not around to to say to me, it's like, maybe I'm overthinking. Maybe I should just try it. Even when going through loss and grief. Whatever you do, don't do it because you're scared. Give it a try. And then then we'll figure it out.

**Tim Samuels 27:00**

Plamena, thank you for giving it a try here. I think a lot of people will take inspiration from your real candour around grief, I know it's something that we find a bit awkward to navigate. And I'm sure a lot of people are very grateful that you have, you've told your story, and you've given it a go, that you haven't been scared. So thank you.

**Plamena Panova-Omanovic 27:20**

It was a pleasure. The more we talk about it, the easier it gets. Maybe not better, but it gets easier over time. So thank you. Thank you for letting me do that.

**Tim Samuels 27:37**

Once again, a big thanks to Plamena for candidly taking on a subject that so often is so difficult to broach. Perhaps because it strikes at our deepest fears. Maybe we just need to be more matter of fact, and give talking a try, even when it's scary. This has been 'We are Vodafone', a podcast series brought to you by Vodafone for Vodafone, and other people. If you want to find out more do look at the resources in the show notes below. Until next time, thanks for listening.