

IWiL Magazine



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Welcome to IWIL



The Board Says Hello

Since 2017, the Initiative Women into Leadership e.V. has been opening doors to new career opportunities for talented women. Our unique cross-mentoring program has already supported almost 300 highly qualified talented female leaders on their path and given them the opportunity to develop their full potential. We are particularly proud of the fact that many of our former mentees are now part of our community as successful leaders and inspiring mentors - a wonderful testament to the power of cohesion and sustainable development.

This success would not be possible without the close, appreciative cooperation with our more than 40 member companies and the passionate commitment of our mentors from the worlds of business, medicine, society and culture. Their tireless commitment and experience make the decisive difference - they are the key to making talents visible in a targeted manner and changing the leadership culture in the long term.

Especially in challenging times, it is more important than ever to support high-performing talents on their path and to shape sustainable leadership. That is why we would like to give you a special glimpse behind the scenes of our initiative: Get to know eight outstanding personalities from our unique community - people who are driving change with courage, passion and vision.

Let's set a visible sign for equal opportunities together. Because we are convinced that real progress can only be made together - with trust, support and the conviction that sustainable leadership and consistent talent management will shape our future.



Interview: Daniela Mündler

From Executive to Founder

From top manager to founder of a sustainable start-up - Daniela Mündler has turned the beauty industry on its head. After impressive career stages at L'Oréal, LVMH and Bahlsen, she founded „simplistick“, a green start-up that is revolutionizing cosmetics purchasing with an innovative mix of sustainability and digitalization. In this interview, she talks about her journey as a manager, founder and mentor - and gives an insight into her vision of changing the industry and inspiring the next generation of women.

You have had an impressive career as an executive and then took off as a founder in the beauty industry. What inspired you to take this step?

It was actually the idea itself, not a conscious career or development decision. I never planned to become a founder - and yet I'm at this point now. I don't come from an entrepreneurial family and it wasn't part of my previous environment. But the idea had been with me for a long time and during the first corona lockdown, I fleshed it out. Then I happened to meet someone with the right profession at exactly the right time who said: „Why don't you start this?“ I hadn't even thought about that before. So it was the content that drove me - not the form.

„I never planned to become a founder - and yet I'm standing here now.“



Press Photo samplstick

What experiences helped you the most when you founded the company?

Commercial know-how such as business plans, cash-flow planning and industry knowledge were essential. Then there are soft skills, especially communication. Whether it's a pitch or a presentation in front of a committee - if you're used to it, you can also convince investors. Sales and marketing are ultimately also communication issues. And, of course, management experience helps, because you learn early on that not everything always goes your way. Dealing with different perspectives is enormously valuable when starting a business.

Your vision is to revolutionize the beauty industry. What makes your approach so unique?

My solution addresses a globally relevant problem: every cosmetics buyer wants to be able to test products before buying them. I combine key trends such as personalization, sustainability, digitalization and consumer centricity in a unique concept that is changing the industry for good.

What hurdles did you have to overcome to be successful in such a competitive industry?

I am calling for a rethink in the industry, which is often met with resistance or reluctance - especially in the role of the buyer. I don't sell a product in the true sense of the word, so the established process doesn't apply here. In contrast, the sales department usually recognizes the added value of my solution immediately. All in all, it requires a great deal of mental transfer. As a founder, I also struggle with typical challenges: Being alone, over 50, female and in the consumer sector - factors that don't exactly make it easier in the investment world.

How does your company remain innovative and relevant in a constantly changing industry?

Innovation is at our core - confirmed by patents, funding and official certificates. We think beyond the classic product sample and see the phase before the purchase decision as the key to responsible consumption. We are also giving more people access to beauty products and challenging established beauty norms. In the future, we will be focusing on topics such as sustainable materials, new product features, data-based personalization and the circular economy. There are more than enough ideas for further developments.

What makes IWIL special for you?

As a mentor for many years, I appreciate the unique exchange with mega-talents from completely different industries. It enriches me enormously to get to know new perspectives and ways of thinking. At the same time, I find my role to be very effective - not through content-related advice, but through active listening, transfer and sharing my own experiences. This model forces me to respond to others even more consciously. IWIL complements my network work perfectly because it promotes heterogeneity and goes beyond typical business or women's networks.



Press Photo samplstick

What values would you like to impart to your mentees in order to strengthen them on their path to leadership positions?

I attach great importance to teaching my mentees the importance of personal branding - not as a question of volume, but as a method for clear positioning in a business context. It is about to know your own most effective performance and to work on it in a targeted manner without having to bend. Reflection, personal responsibility and authenticity are at the heart of this. It is particularly important to me that my mentees understand this: Success does not require a loud presence, but a clear internal attitude and access to one's own resources in order to be able to survive in management positions in the long term.



Portrait of Daniela Mündler

„I believe that every generation has new opportunities, and women should realize that they have the opportunity to change the world through their own actions.“

What do you wish for the next generation of women in management positions?

I would like them to be self-consciously influential, ambitious and unafraid of power and responsibility. I believe that every generation has new opportunities and women should realize that they have the power to change the world through their own actions. It is important to never give up, to actively shape your life and not just adapt to the existing circumstances.

What final advice would you like to give young female founders?

My advice to young female founders: Include the time perspective in your decisions. Life and career offer many opportunities and not everything has to be decided immediately. It is often helpful to wait for challenges first and not to see everything as a crisis. Always think about what options you have before making important decisions.

How do you define good leadership and how has your definition changed over the years?

Good leadership is based on communication and reflection. Anyone who is not prepared to engage with the perspectives of others will find it difficult to lead. In the past, leadership was often a status symbol, today it's more about informal leadership and a willingness to engage in dialog. For me, leadership means not only leading others, but also constantly questioning yourself and remaining adaptable. Leadership is not a rigid toolbox - you always have to be willing to learn and develop.

„For me, leadership means not just leading others, but to constantly questioning yourself and to remain adaptable.“

How do you manage to reconcile professional success and personal fulfillment?

To be honest, I find that very difficult. For me, professional success is a central part of a fulfilled life, but I wouldn't necessarily call it a perfect balance. I am very competitive and focused, which helps me to overcome challenges. But this also has its downsides - I tend to think in tunnels, which makes it difficult for me to switch between work and private life. While I'm busy at work, I also need time for myself to switch off.



Interview: Simona Grandits

Courage, Resilience & Women's Power in the Healthcare Sector

Simona Grandits is an impressive leader in the global healthcare sector and Vice President at QIAGEN. Her career path is characterized by a clear goal: to make healthcare fairer and available to all worldwide. Promoting women's health and overcoming global inequalities in medical care are particularly important to her. But Simona is not only an expert in her industry - she is also a passionate mentor and has gained valuable experience as a mentee at IWIL, which she now actively passes on. In our interview, she talks about the challenges she has overcome as a woman in a male-dominated industry and how she manages to reconcile her professional success with her personal values and goals.

You are Vice President at QIAGEN. What was your biggest motivation for pursuing this career?

The desire to make a meaningful difference is what drives me. The topics of women's health and public health in particular have a very special urgency for me. There is still so much untapped potential to make our society fairer and healthier. What particularly moves me is the inequality that exists in the world. The fact that millions of people will still not have access to basic medical care in 2025 - especially in parts of Africa - is simply unacceptable to me. My goal is clear: when I look back one day, I want to know that I have helped to change the lives of at least some people for the better. The healthcare sector offers the opportunity to do just that - and that's what drives me every day.



Simona in Africa

Is there a person who has particularly inspired you along the way?

There are actually a few people who have inspired me along the way. As a student, I worked for a dentist - a pioneer who brought modern implants to Slovenia at the time. With her vision, she changed the dynamics in the industry for good. Her strength and courage made a lasting impression on me. Later in my career, in the world of large companies, I met many inspiring personalities, who were often men. But my meeting with Sabine at IWIL was a particular turning point. She was different - not only impressive in her professionalism, but also deeply passionate and visionary. Sabine showed me that women sometimes find it difficult to get ahead despite the best results, to get ahead. That changed my thinking, because I had a blind spot here myself. Since then, I have been even more committed to ensuring that women encounter fewer obstacles in their careers - a concern that is particularly close to my heart today.

What setback on your career path has made you grow the most?

I've never had a real setback in my career - at least I wouldn't call it that. But there was one formative event that made me realize the unpredictability and complexity of professional life. When we once had to carry out a far-reaching reorganization and the team was reduced to a third, I had the feeling that my career was not fully under control. It was a moment when I realized how quickly conditions can change - whether due to company decisions or economic constraints. This event taught me to always be prepared and flexible. Since then, I've always had several plans in my head - three, four, sometimes even five alternatives - in case I suddenly have to reorient myself. It wasn't so much a setback as a lesson in resilience and strategic thinking that has left a lasting impression on me.

What was the most daring decision in your career and what did you learn from it?

The most daring decision of my career was the switch from the familiar markets in Eastern Europe to the Middle East and Africa. Africa was close to my heart, but the Middle East was a real challenge - a male-dominated business world in which I had to assert myself as a woman. There is still much greater political instability in these regions. Sudden changes that occur as a result require quick rethinking and so I was able to successfully use my ability to act flexibly and deal confidently with uncertainties. And that's exactly what strengthened me professionally and personally. It was a risky move, but it showed me the importance of adaptability and, above all understanding for the enrichment of different cultures. I still live and promote this „diversity of thought“ in my teams today.

If you could spend one day in the past again, what would it be?

When I was part of a delegation from my former company in 2014 to take over an innovative molecular diagnostics company in the USA, it was an unforgettable moment. We celebrated the signing of a deal that heralded a revolution in diagnostics: a technology that could analyze 20 different bacteria within an hour. I was incredibly proud to be involved in such a pioneering project. That day showed me how much innovation can change the world - a moment I will always remember.

„The fact that in the year 2025 millions of people still have no access to basic medical care is simply unacceptable to me.“



Simona at the Prime Health Medical Diagnostic Lab

How do you deal with the pressure of working in a highly competitive field?

My career has always trained me in resilience. And although stress is constantly present in our field - results have to be delivered quarter after quarter - I don't see it as a burden. Talking to my mentor and doing sport also helps me to balance things out. This allows me to concentrate on the essentials and quickly put minor problems behind me. What relaxes me most, however, is spending time with my son. When I talk to him, many professional challenges are put into perspective. I also believe that we should celebrate more as a team again - even the small successes. That would not only reduce stress, but also make everyday work more enjoyable.

How do you reconcile motherhood and your job?

Reconciling work and motherhood is a challenge. As I am responsible for more than two continents and often travel, it is important for me to consciously make time for my child. I often take him with me, especially to countries that have very different living conditions. That way, he learns how privileged we are and understands that my work is more than just a job - it's a mission. I plan my year in advance to minimize surprises, but flexibility and communication are key when the unexpected happens. I try to show my emotions and authentically combine both worlds so that my son sees how important both are to me.



QIAGEN Summit 2023

„IWiL still plays an important role in my professional and personal development.“

How do you manage to reconcile professional success and personal goals?

For me, it is crucial that my professional successes are in line with my personal values. I firmly believe that healthcare is a human right and not a privilege. Everyone should have access to high-quality healthcare, regardless of their background. I am particularly passionate about raising awareness about women’s health, as many women die from diseases that are 100% preventable. I pursue these issues both professionally and privately because I believe that we can make a positive change in the world.

What advice would you give to young women who dream of pursuing a career similar to yours?

My advice to young women who aspire to a similar career is to be bold, but also to be aware of what it means to take on this responsibility. With an organization of 400 people comes challenges, and you have to be really willing to work hard and continuously develop yourself. There are no shortcuts in life and it doesn’t always come easy. At the same time, it’s important to support each other. I would like women to be kinder to each other and to support each other more - that’s an important change that we need. Stay resilient, curious and don’t stop trying. The word ,no’ shouldn’t discourage you - if it doesn’t work, just try something else!

What makes a good manager for you and how do you try to embody this image yourself?

For me, a good manager is first and foremost a role model. You can’t expect your team to do things that you don’t exemplify yourself. I always try to set a good example, both at work and in dealing with challenges. For example, I am still active in my tasks and therefore always remind myself of the demands I place on my team.

What was the most important thing you took away from your time as a mentee at IWiL?

At IWiL, I have learned that success is not only defined by performance and results, but also by the support and encouragement of others. Sabine in particular made me understand that it is worth working hard for something, even if the path is difficult. What particularly impressed me about IWiL was the focus on promoting women. Until then, I had mainly had male mentors, but IWiL helped me to better understand the specific challenges that women face in professional life. This insight was a valuable lesson for me.

What role does IWiL still play in your professional and personal development today?

IWiL still plays an important role in my professional and personal development. When I can, I continue to participate and stay in touch with the women from my year and my mentor. I also try to support IWiL where I can. For example, I spoke about IWiL at the Women’s Summit in Saudi Arabia last year. It is important to me to carry on this mission and promote IWiL internally in order to continue this valuable work.

My Best DECISION



„To go my own way: to study what I wanted and then very quickly become an entrepreneur myself. That’s why I’m standing here now.“

- Marc Sasserath, CEO sasserath+



„Right after school I started training to become a business manager. Through new challenges, moving and getting to know different markets, I learned a lot.“

- Anke Heppner, Head of POS Marketing DOUGLAS



„Being underpaid 15 years ago and starting out in the agency industry with no personal life. Believed in me, learned a lot, fought hard and that’s why I’m here today.“

- Daniela Weiß, Managing Director Omnicom



„Following my passion for sustainable innovation, health and lifestyle. It enabled me to grow professionally, have a social impact and have a fulfilling sense of purpose.“

- Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternes, Founder



„The shift from the familiar markets in Eastern Europe to the Middle East and Africa. I’ve learned to be flexible and to deal with uncertainty.“

- Simona Grandits, Vice President QIAGEN



„I did a six-month internship in New York while studying. Here I gained a lot of experience and developed great friendships.“

- Clarissa Odewald, chairwoman Thyssenkrupp



„Turning away from my legal career and taking a job in the fashion industry. That became my dream career.“

- Françoise Rousseau, Global Sales Manager



„Choosing my first job based on my passion rather than strategic planning. Experiencing joy and success, and realising that I can make a difference with what I do, boosted my confidence.“

- Daniela Mündler, Founder samplistic



Interview: Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternes

A Journey to Self-determination & Authentic Leadership

Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternes is a true visionary who is driving change in many ways: as a scientist, founder, activist and mentor. Her life is a journey towards self-determination and authentic leadership, characterized by courageous decisions and the unshakable conviction that true strength comes from diversity and collaboration. In this interview, she talks about the most formative moments of her career, her perspective on leadership and why it is so important for her to advocate for equal rights for women and the promotion of diversity.

You wear many hats - scientist, founder, activist and mentor. Is there a role that is particularly close to your heart and why?

Definitely the role of women. For a long time, I defined myself as a sustainability campaigner and futurologist, but today I see how important it is to actively promote diversity and equality. Diversity means not only accepting different perspectives, but recognizing them as enrichment - whether in the compatibility of medicines or access to resources.

What moment in your career has been particularly challenging for you?

I was a managing director in a luxury group and had achieved a seemingly perfect career. But then a skiing accident suddenly threw me completely off track. The existential questions that arose afterwards - whether I would ever be able to walk or work again - turned my life and career plans completely upside down. I had previously defined myself strongly in terms of professional success, but this accident forced me to rethink what really defines me. Initially, I simply applied my old career system to new goals. I quickly realized that this no longer made me happy or fulfilled me. The accident made me realize that success doesn't always have to mean "higher, faster, further" and that happiness isn't always linked to professional success.

Who has particularly inspired you along the way?

My grandmother. She was an impressive woman. After fleeing with four small children, she had nothing and started working as a cleaner. Later, she built up a construction company on her own - an incredible achievement. Her commitment, warmth and generosity, both towards others and herself, had a profound impact on me. She was my great role model.



Anabel on stage

What does a typical day in your life look like?

I don't really have a typical day. Just certain routines that I have established. My day always starts with a cold shower, some yoga, meditation and - if possible - time in the fresh air. I plan my day the evening before, including fixed appointments and to-dos that I schedule flexibly. Last year, I often had up to 30 phone calls and 10 meetings a day, so I didn't get to other tasks until late in the evening. That was too much in the long run. For 2025, I have resolved to be more relaxed: fewer appointments, more freedom and greater composure if something doesn't work out. The focus is now on setting my priorities more clearly and organizing my day more consciously.

What was the most moving or surprising moment on stage?

I was booked for an event with around 1,500 women, mainly secretaries. Everything had been agreed with the organizer in advance - from the content to the clothing. But when I stepped onto the stage, I immediately sensed that it wasn't the right fit. The women seemed frustrated and clearly didn't want to attend the event. I spontaneously took off my shoes, tied my hair back, sat down on the stage and spoke openly about how out of place I felt. Instead of giving the prepared presentation, I improvised with honest storytelling and shared personal experiences - with all my strengths and weaknesses. The reaction was overwhelming. The initial coldness gave way to a warm, genuine connection. After my talk, women came up to me, hugged me and said how much I had touched them. This moment made me realize that it's not about perfection, but about humanity and authenticity. An honest no or admitting weaknesses can sometimes be more powerful than a perfect yes.

What do you do to keep recharging your energy and motivation?

I consciously start my morning with a cold shower, yoga and meditation, go out into the fresh air as much as possible and use tools such as frequency or magnetic devices. Time with my family and music also give me strength. It is precisely these connections between routines, biological factors and well-being that I also address in my new book *The Genetic Happiness Code* - and how we can actively influence our happiness.

„It's not about perfection, but about humanity and authenticity.“



Anabel at an empowerment talk

What inspired you to start your radio show “WeEmpower” and what has been your most important message on the show so far?

The idea for We Empower came from my own experiences with self-doubt and the feeling of always having to live up to the expectations of others - especially as someone with an immigrant background. I wanted to help women recognize their uniqueness and come into their power. I soon realized that men also have similar issues. That’s why I expanded the show to appeal to everyone. My main message is that real strength comes when we support each other - regardless of gender.

You are involved as a mentor at IWIL. Why is this commitment so important to you?

Mentoring is important to me because it’s not just about helping others, but also about growing in the process. The commitment is a give and take - be it through inspiring encounters, joint events or exchanges with impressive women. My previous mentees were often at a crucial point in their lives and it was fulfilling to support them and find solutions together. It feels like a friendship where both sides benefit.

Is there a success story from your mentoring that has particularly moved you?

One piece of advice I often give in mentoring is that it’s not always about running through a closed door with all your might. Many women feel the pressure to achieve their career goals at all costs and immediately. But sometimes it’s better to take a step back and look at the whole situation. You then realize that there is not just this one door - maybe there is a window, another door or a whole new path that you didn’t see before. This perspective has already inspired many of my mentees to re-evaluate their situation and seize the opportunities that really suit them.



Anabel at an empowerment talk

How do you define good leadership and what characterizes a future-oriented manager?

Good leadership begins with good self-management. A manager should be at peace with themselves and not project personal issues onto others. It is about listening attentively, giving feedback, handing over responsibility and at the same time demanding responsibility. A good manager promotes an open culture of error and has a sense of what others need in order to grow. Future-oriented leadership also means giving trust, but clearly knowing the limits. It requires assessing how much you can trust someone to reach the next level.

What personal values are essential for you in all your projects and tasks?

Responsibility and reliability are essential for me - when I take on a task, I stand by it. Creativity is just as important in order to find innovative solutions and not get stuck in familiar ways. Respect and gratitude also play a major role, especially when dealing with otherness. It is crucial to put aside prejudices and listen to others.

How do you manage to consistently live your values as an entrepreneur and activist in everyday life?

For me, it is essential to live my values in all areas of life, because only then do I feel truly satisfied and fulfilled. I make sure to act consciously and authentically, to make every moment as if it could be my last.

What final piece of advice would you like to give other women?

Stay true to yourself and don’t be discouraged by goals that are too big. Pursue your visions with perseverance and get a little closer to your dreams every day. Because it is visions that give us the belief that anything is possible and ultimately allow us to achieve reality.

„Mentoring is like a friendship in which both sides benefit.“



Interview: Daniela Weiß

Leadership with Heart & Mind

In a world where successful leadership relies more than ever on empathy, authenticity and clear direction Daniela Weiß talks about her journey to the top. With a clear focus on people and values, she combines a passion for business with a strong commitment to the advancement of female leaders. In this interview, she shares her personal experiences and challenges that have shaped her along the way and provides valuable insights into her vision.

What motivates you to start the day with passion and energy in the morning?

I am motivated above all by my positive attitude - both privately and professionally. I am optimistic by nature and try to find something positive in every day. These can be small moments with my daughter or inspiring encounters at work. In particular, interacting with other people gives me energy and joy. This togetherness is a great motivation for me to approach every day with passion.

What inspired you to take on the role of Managing Director at Omnicom and what is your vision there?

On the one hand, I enjoy working with people I can learn from and at the same time want to pass on my knowledge. A great motivator is my current CEO, who inspires me a lot and always challenges me to go beyond my limits. secondly, I see the opportunity to create real added value with my work, especially in the area of transformation: how and where will the agency group develop in the coming years, and how do we shape this process? I am also particularly interested in promoting female managers. Although Omnicom is already on the right track, I still see potential. Actively helping to shape change here and acting as a role model was a decisive reason for me to take on this challenge.



Daniela with her former team

What experiences from your time at Mediacom, Ströer and Wort & Bild Verlag help you in your current position?

Each of my experiences has shaped me and made me the manager I am today. At Mediacom, I discovered my love for the agency world - the dynamic environment and the close collaboration with people. Ströer gave me valuable experience in sales: assertiveness, perseverance and the art of being charming but firm. At Wort & Bild, I learned to engage with different personalities and to pursue clear strategic and tactical goals. Today, this experience helps me to motivate my team, overcome challenges and celebrate successes together.

„Each of my experiences has shaped me and made me the leader I am today.“

If you could relive a single moment in your career, what would it be and why?

The moment when my then boss at Ströer entrusted me with the management of the department at the age of 29 was one of the most formative moments in my career. His deep trust in me, combined with his demanding but also supportive manner, motivated me enormously. His sentence: "You've worked hard for it, you've earned it, but don't mess it up now" was a clear signal for me - now it's time to really get going. This experience had a lasting impact on me and strongly influenced my future career path.

What was your biggest professional challenge and how did you overcome it?

My first year as head of department at Ströer. When the figures collapsed, I put myself under a lot of pressure. I learned to set myself apart better and not take everything personally. I faced another challenge years later in my next job. I realized that my line manager and I were no longer on the same page professionally. However, my loyalty to my team made the decision to leave very difficult. However, the move to the management of Omnicom opened up new opportunities for me.

„For me, being a mentor at IWIL primarily means exchanging ideas with talented women who are actively shaping their career paths.“

What does it mean to you to be a mentor at IWIL?

For me, being a mentor at IWIL primarily means exchanging ideas with talented women who are actively shaping their careers. I accompany them through challenges, reflect on successes with them and pass on experiences - just as I myself was shaped by mentors, especially my father. This role is not only valuable to me, but also inspiring, as I take a lot away from every encounter myself. I always see mentoring as give and take for both sides.



Daniela at a talk

„I accompany them through challenges, reflect on successes with them and pass on experiences - just as I myself was shaped by mentors, especially my father.“



Daniela in a panel discussion

What makes IWIL special for you?

For me, IWIL is above all a strong network of female managers that promotes exchange and mutual support. Women are often too reluctant to network and IWIL helps to change that. Sabine and Natalie have brought together impressive women who inspire and strengthen each other. Since joining in 2020, I have found it incredibly enriching and would recommend it to any woman.

What makes a good manager and how do you try to embody this image yourself?

For me, a good manager is characterized by empathy, authenticity and clear orientation. I lead according to the principle of "loving but strict" - as part of the team, but with clear guidelines. Transparency, empathetic communication and the ability to motivate people intrinsically are important to me. I want to master the last stretch of a journey, which is often the most challenging, together with my team.

How do you manage to reconcile professional success and personal fulfillment?

I manage to reconcile professional success and personal fulfillment mainly because I really enjoy my job. I have the privilege of having flexible working hours, which allows me to organize my own time - for example, being there for my daughter on Monday afternoons and then continuing to work in the evening. Without my social network, especially my mother, this would not be possible. I also try to consciously take time out, whether it's short walks or a wellness weekend. Children ground you and that helps me to keep my balance. It's crucial for me to be happy in my professional environment, which also has an impact on my family life.

What do you wish for the next generation of women in management positions?

I would like it to become a matter of course to see women there without questioning their gender. They should doubt themselves less and not have to constantly justify themselves, as is often still the case. Women should find their way with ease and use their leadership style to drive change without having to prove themselves.

What would be your final advice?

My final piece of advice would be that every woman, including my own daughter, should pursue her goals and desires with clarity and ambition. She shouldn't let others tell her that she can't achieve something, but should always believe in her own strength and remain steadfast.

„Women should find their way with ease and use their leadership style to drive change without having to prove themselves.“



Interview: Clarissa Odewald

Success in a Male Dominated Industry

In an industry traditionally dominated by men Clarissa Odewald has established herself as a leader and impresses with her clear vision and ability to shape change. Her career path has taken her from industrial clerk to team leader in the steel industry, where she sets new standards with courage and assertiveness. In this interview, she talks about her experiences, the importance of mentoring and why success is more than just numbers for her.

When you look back on your career, was there a decisive moment that had a lasting impact on your path?

A decisive moment was when I made the decision to train as an industrial clerk after graduating from high school and then study business administration. Studying was the turning point for me to develop further and advance my career in the long term.

What originally fascinated you about the steel industry and how has your perspective on it changed over the years?

The steel industry has fascinated me from the very beginning because steel is used in so many everyday products - from cars to washing machines. Especially at Thyssenkrupp Rasselstein, where we produce tinplate for the packaging industry, it's exciting to see how our steel is used in things like tin cans and tear-off lids. What never ceases to amaze me is how versatile and technologically advanced steel is.

Has there been a challenge in your career that has made you particularly strong?

One of the biggest challenges was definitely starting out in a very male-dominated environment. After my studies, I worked as a trainee in Raw Materials Purchasing, which was very male-dominated. The real challenge came when I was appointed team leader after just three years - in a department where many male colleagues had been there much longer and had probably been hoping for this position themselves. Working as a woman and one of the youngest team leaders in this area was anything but easy.

„The exchange with other mentees was refreshing and helped me to build a network with women who share similar challenges.“

How did you manage to gain a foothold in this male-dominated industry?

I managed it by focusing less on the topic of "man vs. woman" and more on the content aspect. I learned a lot from my male colleagues and was lucky that a lot has changed at thyssenkrupp in the last 17 years - the company is becoming increasingly diverse. An important factor for me was also a certain openness and perhaps a bit of naivety in the way I approached the topics.

Is there any piece of advice that has helped you in particular during difficult times in your career?

An important piece of advice that I always pass on myself is to look for mentors - both internally and externally. I was lucky enough to always have very good mentors at my side. It was particularly helpful to get a different perspective from outside. A sparring partner who is there to advise you is incredibly valuable.

How important has your time at IWIL been for your personal and professional development?

My time as a mentee at IWIL was an incredibly enriching experience that helped me both personally and professionally. The exchange with other mentees was refreshing and helped me to build a network with women who share similar challenges. I still maintain some contacts. My mentor was also particularly valuable. The regular exchanges, both in person and virtually, opened up new perspectives for me and provided valuable advice from a completely different industry.

Was there a special moment from your time at IWIL that particularly inspired you?

Overall, it was simply the collaboration with my mentor. We worked together on a development plan for me, and he repeatedly encouraged me to reflect on my goals and approaches with his challenging questions. This targeted food for thought helped me enormously. Another highlight was the visit to the TUI headquarters in Hanover - an impressive day that opened up new perspectives for me.

„Working as a woman and one of the youngest team leaders in this area was anything but easy.“

What role does mentoring play in your personal life?

Mentoring plays a very important role for me, both from the perspective of giving and receiving. I have always benefited from mentors and would now like to pass on my knowledge. I am also a regular mentor at thyssenkrupp, most recently for a mentee from a completely different area. The exchange is always enriching for me - I give advice, but also take away a lot for my own development.



Clarissa at the steelwork

„I became a team leader in my 30s and really enjoyed driving things forward, making changes and building teams.“

What motivated you to take on management responsibility?

I have always been motivated by the desire to take on responsibility. I started taking on responsibility on a small scale during my training and this grew over time. I became a team leader at the age of 30 and really enjoyed driving things forward, making changes and building teams. I particularly enjoyed developing young people, especially trainees. It is always great for me to see the path they have taken and how they have developed.

What makes a good manager in your eyes?

For me, a good manager is not necessarily the best professional, but someone with the right mindset. Openness to new topics, a willingness to change and the ability to give feedback are crucial for me. A good manager drives issues forward, is not afraid of change and has the will to develop their team and employees.

How do you define success for yourself?

For me, success means successfully developing and implementing topics so that they lead to positive results. At the same time, I consider it a success if I can take my employees along with me on this journey, especially in challenging and uncertain times. Success is not only reflected in KPIs, but also in how you as a manager lead the team through transformations and achieve a goal together.

What final piece of advice would you give to women aspiring to a management position?

Think carefully about why you want to become a manager. Leadership is not always easy, and not everyone should pursue this goal. It is important to ask yourself this question consciously and to reflect on yourself. I would also advise everyone, whether women or men, to be confident, not to put themselves under unnecessary pressure and to realize that a lot of learning comes from doing. Have patience and composure - you don't have to achieve everything immediately.

„For me, success means successfully developing and implementing topics so that they lead to positive results.“



Portrait of Clarissa

My Biggest CHALLENGE



„I've often trusted the wrong people, which has led to challenges. But I've never become cynical and still put my trust in selected people.“

- Marc Sasserath, CEO sassera+



„In Shanghai, taking on responsibility for marketing, sales and purchasing for the Chinese market of a textile company. A challenging but exciting experience.“

- Anke Heppner, Head of POS Marketing DOUGLAS



„I worked passionately and put the desire to have children behind me for a long time. Finding the balance was challenging - today I'm grateful for my daughter and my professional fulfillment.“

- Daniela Weiß, Managing Director Omnicom



„The change from the top manager in the consumer goods sector to the founder in other industries was a challenge that enriched and strengthened me professionally and personally.“

- Prof. Dr. Anabel Ternes, Founder



„The shift from the familiar markets in Eastern Europe to the Middle East and Africa - a male-dominated business world in which I had to assert myself as a woman.“

- Simona Grandits, Vice President QIAGEN



„The confrontation with short-time work. Shortly after taking over from the trainee programme, short-time work had to be done and I was also affected by it.“

- Clarissa Odewald, Chairwoman Thyssenkrupp



„When I returned to Ralph Lauren after my first maternity leave, I was replaced by a man. But I didn't give up and fought back.“

- Françoise Rousseau, Global Sales Manager



„One coach aptly called it expulsion from paradise: After positive starting years, the euphoria eventually falls and I had to reorder and rethink - but the gathered strength strengthened me.“

- Daniela Mündler, Founder samplistic



Interview: Anke Heppner

Courage & the Key to True Fulfillment

Anke Heppner has built her career on bold decisions and far-reaching change, from leading the Chinese market for Tally Weijl to moving into the beauty industry. Her journey is an inspiring example of professional growth and the development of creative, authentic leadership. In the interview, she shares her most valuable experiences, the challenges she faced as a woman in a leadership position and how she manages to balance her professional and family commitments. A conversation about courage, innovation and the importance of mentoring and female leadership.

What has been the boldest move in your career so far?

The boldest move was definitely to go to Shanghai. As a young woman, I was given the opportunity by the CEO at Tally Weijl to take on responsibility for the Chinese market. It was an exciting and formative experience - a year full of challenges and growth. Suddenly, I was in charge of 80 employees, many of whom spoke little English. This made communication challenging, but also all the more instructive. This time not only made me more independent, but also changed the way I look at business strategies. An experience I don't want to miss.

Is there a moment in your professional life that changed your perspective on success?

A defining moment was my apprenticeship as a manager at Woolworths straight out of school. Without knowing exactly what I was getting into, it laid the foundation for my career and my perspective on success. Since then, I've learned in various industries and companies that success is not just in big milestones, but in the many decisions and experiences that shape your own path.



Anke at a DOUGLAS Store

How did your entry into the beauty industry change your perspective on creativity and innovation?

Moving from the textile industry to the beauty industry 15 years ago has greatly broadened my view of creativity and innovation. The beauty industry is incredibly diverse, with a plethora of brands, concepts and novelties. I've learned that creativity doesn't just mean a wealth of ideas, but also the courage to back up those ideas with a solid business case. I find the connection to art and culture particularly inspiring, as with creative projects with Mary Lennox. There's a lot of space in this industry to create, experiment and really make a difference - that's what keeps me excited to this day.

„The beauty industry is incredibly diverse, with a plethora of brands, concepts and novelties.“

„For me, job satisfaction is the key to sustainable success - for each individual and for the team.“

An important lesson in your career?

One of the most important lessons in my career has been that there are no definitive wrong decisions, only experiences that you learn from and move you forward. One example of this was my move from sales to purchasing. Although I quickly realized that shopping is not my passion - I lacked the direct contact with the end consumer and the momentum - this year was a valuable experience. It helped me see what I really want, and eventually led me into marketing, where I felt much more comfortable. I also learned how important it is not to be discouraged by criticism or setbacks.

Which values are most important to you as a leader?

I place great importance on open, respectful collaboration on an equal footing. Titles are secondary to me - whether work student, intern or team lead, all team members deserve the same respect and importance. Clear goals, mutual support and a balanced give and take are essential to me. I want to create a work environment where everyone feels comfortable and motivated to achieve great things together. For me, job satisfaction is the key to sustainable success - for each individual and for the team.

What have you learned from your time as a mentee at IWIL?

My time as a mentee at IWIL has enriched me most of all by interacting with inspiring people. The diversity of the participants and their industries has opened up new perspectives for me. It's been exciting to see how others in similar positions are tackling challenges and the importance of women in leadership roles in different companies. Personally, I've not only gained professional momentum, but also made valuable friendships. But I particularly appreciate the conversations with my mentor who help me pause and focus on my own development. These conscious moments have given me clarity about where I want to go professionally.



Anke and the office dog

What does IWIL mean to you?

For me, IWIL is an inspiring community that brings together women from all walks of life to pursue a common goal: the advancement and support of women. I find the diversity of perspectives and the regular impulses - whether through monthly meetings, exciting topics or digital formats - particularly impressive. What really sets IWIL apart is the combination of community and personal mentoring experience. It's not just a one-time program, it's an ongoing journey.

What does mentoring mean to you personally?

For me, mentoring is a daily part of my working life, especially through the leadership of my team. With 18 employees, I take on a mentoring role by supporting them in their career paths. In addition, I have an internal mentoring program where I exchange regularly with my mentee and gain fresh perspectives. It's about investing time to accompany employees in their career steps. For me, mentorship means continuous support and guidance.

What challenges or opportunities do you see for women in leadership positions?

Women in leadership positions face the challenge of reconciling work and private life, such as family and career. In addition, in many cases, women still have to prove themselves more to receive the same recognition as their male counterparts. This is precisely why we need more female role models who inspire others. At the same time, women bring valuable leadership qualities through their emotional intelligence and empathy. They can implement modern, open leadership approaches well and adapt flexibly to the needs of new generations.

„Women can implement modern, open leadership approaches well and adapt flexibly to the needs of new generations.“



Anke shows how fun at work works

How do you balance motherhood and career?

I try to integrate my daughter into my work life by telling her how my day was and also taking her to the office sometimes so she can get to know the people there. She's even interested in working at Douglas! It's important to me to find a good work-life balance. When important moments arise, I consciously take time for them and thankfully Douglas is very flexible. We used to regularly schedule a mum-daughter day where she could choose something special. My husband also supports me, which helps me stay focused both professionally and privately. A strong home creates a strong foundation for success on the job.

What advice would you like to give in conclusion?

My advice is never to be afraid to take the next step. Be brave, take the opportunities that come your way and go your way. And most importantly, have fun. That's my favourite word and motto. If you're really happy with what you're doing and feel balanced, then the journey becomes all the more fulfilling.

„Have fun! That's my favorite word and motto.“



Interview: Marc Sasserath

Identity Innovation & the Path to Success

Marc Sasserath has taken his own path far from the supposedly secure succession in the family business. Instead, his journey took him through philosophy, psychology and brand strategy that made him a leading expert in the world of brand management and communication. In this interview, he talks about how he lives the link between identity and innovation, the role mentoring plays in his career, and why success is more than just growth and numbers for him. A look behind the scenes of his fascinating career, which shows us that the path is often more important than the destination.

You've already had an impressive career. What inspired you to take this path?

My path was originally different - the family business was supposed to be my future. But a family breakdown led me to study philosophy, psychology and romance at the same time. A fellow student told me about his passion for communication, and suddenly I knew: this is it. I applied to Saatchi & Saatchi - and was accepted. Since then, my professional life has revolved around identity, brands and psychology. It was a happy detour that turned out to be just the right one.

How have these different disciplines influenced your approach to leadership or innovation?

Psychology teaches me to recognize organizations and their dysfunctions - and to redefine leadership through targeted interventions. Brands, on the other hand, are an auxiliary construct of identity: they show who you are, what you can do, and where you should go. This combination of psychological understanding and brand strategy shapes my approach to leadership - as an art of providing clarity and direction.

„My path was originally a different one - Family businesses should be my future.“



Shooting for Marc's brand

A moment in your career that you'd like to relive again?

I'm someone who lives in the here and now and is more excited about the future than the past. There have been many great moments - my appointment at Saatchi & Saatchi, my first day there, my goodbyes, starting my own company. But I don't feel the need to relive any of that again. I don't regret anything, but I relish every new day, every learning and every experience that takes me forward. The best moments are often the ones that lie ahead.

Which setback has shaped you the most?

Setbacks are part of life - and often mark more than successes. One of the defining ones for me was the break with the family business. I was supposed to go into succession, but I had no passion for it. The resulting family break was profound, and ultimately led to the destruction of family relationships. But this experience brought me an essential realization: I am responsible for my own path.

How do you see the future of brand management in terms of digitalisation and globalisation?

The future of brand management remains essentially unchanged: brands must be relevant, unique, and non-contradictory. But the way they reach people has radically changed. In the past, mass media and socio-demographic audiences were relied on. Today, technology enables a hyper-personalized approach - everyone experiences the brand individually without losing its core. AI, algorithms and real-time data allow for tailored communication across digital channels, global yet approachable. The exciting part? Technology doesn't make brands more impersonal, but allows for a deeper, more individual relationship - almost like a real friendship.

„I'm committed to having the best lead, regardless of external characteristics.“



Portrait of Marc

What challenges do companies face in the field of innovation today?

Companies today face two key challenges in innovation: first, how to use technology properly. It should not replace people, but support them. The balance between automation and humanity is crucial. Second, the growing influence of fewer tech giants. Companies like Google and Meta have a power that sometimes goes beyond that of nation states - with risks for brands, markets and society. The solution? Technology and humanity must play together as yin and yang. This is the only way to make innovation meaningful and responsible.

Why is your involvement as a mentor at IWIL so important to you?

Because I believe in a prejudice-free world where talent counts - not gender or ethnicity. In this country, there are still huge inequalities. I am committed to ensuring that the best lead, regardless of outward characteristics. For me, it is a person's abilities that count, and nothing else.



Marc with a team member of Supermarque

What's the most important lesson you pass on to your mentees as a mentor?

The most important lesson I want to teach my mentees is to be self-sufficient. That means knowing what you're good at, what you like to do, and what the world needs - and creating something that's both personally fulfilling and economically viable. I often use Ikigai's model, which helps connect these four questions: What can I do? What do I like to do? What's the world need? And what is it willing to pay for? That clarity is the key to a fulfilling and successful work life.

Have you also had a good mentor on your journey so far?

Yes, I had mentors, but not in a traditional, institutionalized setting. I had two or three inspiring supervisors who were particularly inspiring. They not only challenged me, but always encouraged me to question my perspectives and develop myself. Also, during my master's degree in clinical organizational psychology, I had a professor who held a similar role. I still have regular exchanges with him, especially when faced with uncertainties or difficult questions.

What makes a good leader in your eyes?

A good leader has clear goals and a strong identity, both for herself and for the organization. She fosters a culture of autonomy, transparency and clear values. She also creates clear structures and processes to work effectively with her team. This balance of strategy, culture and structure is what makes good leadership in my opinion.

How do you define success for yourself?

For me, success is not measured by business metrics or growth alone. Success is about having a positive impact and spreading happiness without failing economically. It's about running an organization that is stable and profitable, creating jobs while fostering a people-friendly culture. Money is important, but not the primary goal - true success lies in making a positive contribution to the world and people's well-being.

What advice would you give to young entrepreneurs at the beginning of their journey?

I would advise them to ask themselves three key questions: Why this, why you, why now? Why this particular idea, why this team, and why now's the right time? If the business idea really addresses a relevant need, offers a solution that many others aren't already offering, and is sustainable for the long term, then that's a strong foundation. It's important to have clarity about your own identity as a company, and to ensure that the solution is relevant and unique to other people. If you can communicate that without controversy, you've achieved a lot.

„Success means having a positive impact and spreading happiness without to fail economically.“



Interview: Françoise Rousseau

Stylish to the Top

A true power woman in the fiercely competitive fashion industry. Ralph Lauren, Escada, Luisa Cerano: As Head of Sales, Françoise Rousseau has led numerous fashion companies to the top. With ease, she combines career and family - all perfectly styled. For Françoise, power dressing isn't just a trend. Rather, it's a lifestyle that has made her her a trademark. In this interview, she talks about the quiet power of fashion, how to combine femininity and assertiveness, and why her yellow coat is more than just a garment for her.

If you could relive one particular event in your career, what would it be?

There are many moments you'd like to relive but for me, the annual awards at our European Sales Conference by Ralph Lauren have always been something special. At first, it was a great joy to be honored - but later it was even more fulfilling to present these awards. Celebrating common achievements in front of hundreds of colleagues, feeling the team spirit and experiencing this unique moment of community was a highlight every year.

How have trends in business fashion for women changed in recent years?

Business fashion for women has changed. Trends are often more durable than many think; for example, wide-leg trousers, which have been popular for three to four years, have only just taken hold. There is now a mix of practical and chic in business fashion. Tailoring remains important, but the materials are more comfortable, which may be a response to the coronavirus pandemic and the home office. There's also a growing awareness of sustainability. More and more women are interested in where their clothes come from and are opting for quality, timeless pieces. Fast fashion is passé. Investments in classics and basics are increasingly appreciated.

„Femininity is shown not just through the clothes, but also through the attitude and charisma.“



Francoise Rousseau in her power look

How can women emphasize their femininity and still be assertive?

Through dresses, skirts and accessories, women can certainly emphasize their femininity without losing their assertiveness. In the fashion industry, we often have more freedom than in other fields where there are stricter dress codes. But in formal industries, feminine accents can also be set through jewelry or accessories. It's important to find a balance - not to appear over-the-top. Femininity is not only expressed through clothing, but also through attitude and charisma.

What is your personal power look?

Often classic black. For example, a black jacket or blouse paired with my yellow coat. It's become something of my trademark now. My team knows immediately that an important day is coming when I wear it. Funnily enough, I bought my fourth yellow coat the other day - I love this colour!

Have you ever deliberately broken a dress code to make a statement?

No, but I definitely make a statement with my clothes. Luckily, in the fashion industry, you have a lot of leeway. One example is denim - I love it in all its forms, whether with eye-catching washes or embellishments. Paired with chic high heels and a simple black jumper, you can also make a strong statement. Of course, there are formal occasions and meetings where you stick to certain rules, but overall I enjoy the freedom that fashion affords me.



Francoise Rousseau at a Luisa Cerano event

„Women already have enough challenges to overcome, so we shouldn't have to discuss their clothes.“

Can a woman in a leadership position be made vulnerable by a "wrong" outfit?

I don't think so, but it definitely creates conversation - and it's unnecessary. Women already have enough challenges to overcome, so we shouldn't have to discuss their clothes. It's important to find the right balance, because being too sexy is often perceived as superficial, while being too masculine can be seen as unfeminine. Every woman should stay true to herself and find her style without providing unnecessary conversation. Angela Merkel once jokingly said her biggest challenge was wearing lipstick every day and hearing comments about it - and there's some truth to that.

Why is the appearance of women in leadership positions often much more important than men?

I think it has a lot to do with history. Women haven't been in leadership positions for so long, and as a different gender, they offer more scope for attack when it comes to their looks. Men's suits are hardly commented on, but there is more diversity among women, which can quickly become a topic of conversation. However, I see this as an opportunity rather than a problem - we have the opportunity to make a strong impression through our clothes. It's important not to fall into provocation traps: no one needs unnecessary talk.



Portrait of Françoise Rousseau

What does mentoring mean to you personally?

For me, mentoring is about passing on experience and accompanying people in their development. It's not just about avoiding stumbling blocks, it's also about creating a protected space where any question is allowed and perspectives can grow. I find the role of the observer particularly exciting - finding out what a person really needs without imposing their own method on them. In the end, what counts is that the mentee is empowered and inspired.

What do you expect from your time at IWIL?

From my mentorship at IWIL, I expect inspiring exchanges, exciting encounters and the opportunity to share my experience in a meaningful way. At the same time, I am looking forward to learning from a younger generation - to understand their perspectives, their thinking and actions. Looking beyond the fringes of the industry and engaging with people who are different is enriching for both sides. I am excited about the next steps and look forward to being part of this process.

How did you get to the top of the fashion industry as a woman?

Above all, courage. Courage to show up and take responsibility. I've always asked for more responsibility and carried it, which many others may not have been able to do. A strong network is also crucial - it's important to make connections and not be afraid of failure. My mentality has always been: go easy and don't be afraid of new challenges. The joy of trying and the urge to think and act differently have always driven me and helped me move forward. A little bit of luck is always part of it. Sometimes you just have to be in the right place at the right time and work with the right people. I guess for me it was a mixture of courage, hard work and a little bit of luck.

What skills are especially important to hold a leadership position?

The key is to have a clear vision that is consistent with the company's DNA and goals. In addition, diligence and discipline are essential. My father always told me that there are many smart people out there and that preparation is the key to success. It takes discipline to stick to it and not give up. An old saying goes, „Motivation gets you started, discipline keeps you going.“

What advice would you give young women at the start of their careers?

My advice is simple: Trust yourself. Raise your hand and don't wait for someone to think of you. You have to take action yourself and say, „I want this. I dare to do this!“ Stand by your thoughts, never stand in the way. Even if you plan to have children in the future, for example, still apply for positions that interest you. Who knows when the opportunity will come? Ultimately, you're in charge of your career, so go ahead and believe in yourself!

„Sometimes you just have to be in the right place at the right time and work together with the right people.“

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