

IWiL Magazine 2026



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Welcome to IWIL



Dr. Natalie Daghles



Dr. Maike Albers-Malkus



Nicole Riggers



Dr. Werner Grünewald

The board says hello!

Since 2017, the Women into Leadership e.V. initiative has been supporting talented women on their path to positions of responsibility. With our unique cross-mentoring program, we have already been able to support almost 300 highly qualified leadership talents and open up new perspectives for their professional development. We are particularly pleased that many former mentees are now successful managers themselves and are passing on their knowledge and experience to the next generation as mentors. This is a strong indication of how valuable mutual support and sustainable promotion can be.

This success is based on close and trusting cooperation with more than 40 member companies and the tremendous commitment of our mentors from the worlds of business, medicine, society, and culture. With their time, experience, and willingness to take on responsibility, they make a decisive contribution to making talent visible and making leadership more diverse in the long term.

In times of great change, it becomes clear how important it is to promote talent in a targeted manner and strengthen future-oriented leadership. That is why we would like to give you a special insight into our initiative in this issue: Meet eight impressive personalities from the IWIL community—people who drive change with attitude, commitment and new perspectives.

Let's continue to send a strong message for equal opportunities together. Because we are convinced that progress happens when people support each other, trust each other and take joint responsibility for the future.



Interview: Béatrice Guillaume-Grabisch

Beyond the obvious

What does leadership mean when growth suddenly turns into stagnation and you are responsible for laying off many employees? For Béatrice Guillaume-Grabisch, that is precisely the moment when true leadership reveals itself.

The long-time top executive of the Nestlé Group, who among other roles led Nestlé Germany and the joint venture with Coca-Cola, has guided international organizations through transformations, built cultural bridges and carried responsibility at a global level. Today she is a member of the board of L'Oréal and has recently become a mentor at IWIL. In this interview, she talks about why leadership proves itself in difficult decisions, why purpose and inclusion are not optional extras and how technology can become an enabler for fairness.

If you could relive one day in your life, which would it be and why?

My 60th birthday was a particularly meaningful day. I used it as an opportunity to bring together family and friends from different phases of my life and from different countries. It was not only a celebration for me, but also a chance to connect people with each other. I would love to experience that energy and joy again, especially because shared time becomes more valuable as we grow older.

What role have role models played in your career?

Role models have always played a very important role for me. They provide inspiration, motivation and perseverance. I have always been inspired by personalities such as Christine Lagarde, Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton. They operated under significant public pressure, which makes their achievements even more remarkable. When you see that others have succeeded despite obstacles, you think to yourself: I can do it too.



Béatrice in Mexico with Nestlé

„I have always been inspired by personalities such as Christine Lagarde, Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton.“

What was the biggest challenge for you as a woman in senior leadership?

In some ways I had an advantage because I was born in France. There, the balance between family and career is more deeply rooted in society and I had female role models early on. Still, in many professional situations I was the only woman on the leadership team. For a long time that did not bother me. But over time I realized that it is not only about how you perceive the situation yourself, but also about how others experience it. Different perspectives create diversity, but they can also lead to misunderstandings. I learned to consciously build bridges and to use these differences constructively.

Which moment in your life shaped your understanding of leadership the most?

Definitely the moment when I had to take responsibility for laying off many employees. At the time I was leading the joint venture between Coca-Cola and Nestlé. Instead of continuing to expand as planned, the parent companies decided to restructure the business and focus on the core activities. That meant a massive strategic shift and very difficult personnel decisions. It was particularly important to me to support those who had to leave as much as possible while giving clear orientation to those who stayed. In the end we achieved our goals and even grew faster than the competition. That experience showed me that leadership does not reveal itself during growth phases, but in difficult moments and that it means taking responsibility for people just as seriously as for results.

How have international experiences influenced your leadership style?

My mother was born in Berlin, my father was French and my husband comes from Argentina, so international perspectives were part of my life from the very beginning. I studied in France and the United States and now work in Germany. All of these experiences have shaped my leadership style significantly. Ideally, I like to think of it as a “cocktail” of different cultures: the American “just do it” mentality, the balance of European thinking and the discipline found in many Asian cultures. In international teams, this enriching mix naturally emerges.

What mindset distinguishes good leaders from truly effective ones?

Many leaders are satisfied with simply being good. That may be enough in the beginning, but it does not make the real difference. Truly effective leaders look beyond their own area of responsibility. They take ownership beyond their immediate scope and create real impact for the entire organization. That is what separates solid work from exceptional leadership.

„Leadership is not demonstrated during periods of growth, but rather in difficult moments - and it means taking responsibility for people just as seriously as for results.“



Béatrice with Condoleezza Rice

Which values or attitudes are essential for a leader?

Purpose, meaning the reason a company exists, forms the foundation. From that purpose the core values of leadership should be derived. Strategy, expertise and execution build upon that foundation. But without purpose and values, the base is missing. They are the ground on which everything else grows.

Which small everyday actions strengthen inclusion in teams the most?

Often it is the informal moments, conversations at the coffee machine or by the copier. These are spontaneous and authentic situations where people truly connect. Digital communication is efficient, but physical presence and informal conversations create real belonging and strengthen the team spirit in a lasting way.



Portrait Béatrice Guillaume-Grabisch

How do you deal with situations where different cultures or perspectives collide?

One often underestimated moment is the first round of introductions. It is much more than a formality. It is the first real encounter between personalities and cultures and it often determines how open, respectful and trusting the collaboration will be. It is also important to be able to decode cultures. Literature such as *Riding the Waves of Culture* helps to better understand differences. The key is not only to recognize differences but to consciously combine them.

„Only when you dare to believe in yourself can you truly realize your potential.“

Where do you see the greatest opportunity for technology to promote fairness and diversity in companies?

The greatest opportunity lies in the democratization of knowledge and skills. Digital tools are fundamentally accessible to everyone, regardless of age, background or career path. When companies empower employees to use these technologies, new development opportunities arise that depend less on traditional hierarchies or networks. What matters is not where someone comes from, but their willingness to learn and the support they receive at the beginning.

What motivated you personally to become part of IWIL?

Throughout my career I was given many opportunities and I had people around me who supported me and believed in me. For me it is important to pass that support on. That is why I became involved with IWIL. Mentoring, however, is not a one-way street. When the matching works well, a genuine exchange emerges at eye level and it becomes a win-win for both sides.

What insight would you share with your younger self?

Trust yourself. People often do not fail because they lack ability, but because they lack confidence. Only when you dare to believe in yourself can you truly realize your potential.



Béatrice in a ultralight plane in Val D'Isere



Interview: Sophie von Saldern

Between Passion and Expectation

From the national team to top management: Sophie von Saldern knows what it means to reinvent herself. For nearly two decades, she played professional basketball and represented Germany more than 100 times at European and World Championships. Today, as Global Head of Human Resources at Co-vestro, she leads the global HR function of an international industrial group. Her belief that growth also means taking responsibility was recently reflected in her role as patron of the IWIL mentoring year 2025/26.

In this interview, she speaks about the power that comes from genuine passion, why authentic leadership grows out of joy rather than pressure, and how freeing oneself from societal expectations can help people find their own path.



Sophie on the basketball court (Foto: DBB-Archiv)

Was there a moment that fundamentally changed your perspective on career and life?

Often it is life's difficult moments, illness, loss or setbacks, that recalibrate everything. Such experiences put many things into perspective and bring what truly matters back into focus. I consider this kind of recalibration very healthy, especially for leadership. You approach professional challenges with greater calm and do not lose sight of the bigger picture. Professional events feel less dramatic when you know that most problems can somehow be solved and that life goes on.

How did you manage the transition from professional sports to the corporate world?

The transition was actually very difficult for me at first. Professional sports is a kind of microcosm where I had a role, where I was in the spotlight and where my voice was heard. When I moved into the corporate world, I had to start again from the very beginning as a newcomer without status or standing. I almost experienced the transition like an early retirement. Everything I had built in sports suddenly disappeared. There was also the physical adjustment: sitting at a laptop for hours instead of constant movement and adrenaline. I deeply missed the rush, the endorphins and the sense of flow. For me, the transition was truly a challenge.

Which lesson from your professional sports career still shapes you today?

What I took most from my professional sports career is the realization of how much strength comes from genuine passion. In professional sports, your entire life is geared toward performance 24/7. Such commitment is only possible when it is driven by inner enthusiasm. That same passion helped me through the inevitable lows, through injuries, defeats and difficult phases. What I learned from this, and what still shapes me today, is that just as no wave of success lasts forever, every low will eventually pass as well. Passion for what you do, combined with the awareness that both highs and lows are temporary, has become a life philosophy that goes far beyond sports.

What makes your role as Global Head of HR at Covestro particularly exciting and challenging?

What makes it especially exciting is the major transformation Covestro is currently undergoing, particularly its ambitious sustainability agenda. At the same time, the chemical industry is facing significant economic challenges. For HR, this means a wide range of constantly evolving tasks. That dynamic makes the role demanding but also particularly fascinating.

Does authentic leadership grow out of the pressure to prove oneself or from the desire to make a difference?

For me, authentic leadership grows out of the joy of bringing people along, mobilizing them and watching them grow. Of course, leaders want to make a difference, but leadership should never simply be a means to achieve status. It becomes authentic when someone genuinely enjoys supporting teams, developing individuals and enabling progress. If you truly enjoy seeing others grow, you already bring an important foundation for authentic leadership.

Were there experiences that shaped you as a leader in a lasting way?

The greatest challenge is what I would call the pull of everyday business. Even excellent leaders can get caught in the vortex of meetings, emails and operational work and lose touch with their own leadership philosophy. Leadership means talking, listening and being present, yet these are exactly the things that often get lost in daily routines. The real art lies in regularly pausing and asking yourself: Am I still the leader I want to be?



Sophie playing basketball in her younger years (Foto: DBB-Archiv)

„Those who enjoy seeing others grow possess an important prerequisite for authentic leadership.“

How can someone build a career without being driven by societal expectations?

The first step is awareness. Societal expectations influence us strongly, especially women and mothers. For a long time, I also followed the principle of higher, faster, further and wanted to be perfect both as a mother and as a leader. Balancing family and career remains one of the greatest challenges for many women despite all the progress that has been made. The key is conscious reflection: Do I have to meet every expectation from the outside, or do I choose my own path and my own values? Sometimes that also means bringing a store-bought cake to the kindergarten celebration instead of baking one yourself.

How do you stay motivated over the long term when work and life are constantly changing?

Personally, I thrive on change. If nothing ever changed, I would find it boring. At the same time, I understand that many people experience the speed of change as stressful. For me, leadership also means taking these concerns seriously and bringing people along through change. It is about helping people see change not as a threat but as an opportunity, while making sure that no one is left behind.



Sophie at the IWIL Kick Off 2025

„Your own path emerges where joy, capability and personal values meet.“

What will you remember most from your time as patron of the IWIL mentoring year?

The kick-off event in Düsseldorf. When the mentees introduced themselves, I had goosebumps. So many intelligent, confident and at the same time humble young women, it was truly impressive. That moment showed me how much potential there is in the next generation. It was a very moving and inspiring experience that I will not forget.

Which small things in your everyday life give you energy or orientation?

My first coffee in the morning and the last walk with my dog in the evening. These two moments are my anchors. They consciously mark the beginning and the end of my day. They are small rituals that give me structure and calm.

What does mentoring mean to you personally?

Mentoring is one of the most powerful tools for personal development. I was fortunate to always have people around me who supported and guided me. It was never just one person, but different mentors depending on the topic or phase of life. The opportunity for self-reflection that good mentoring creates is essential for personal growth. It does not only support the mentee but also transforms the mentor. This mutual development makes mentoring a true win-win format for me.

„Mentoring is one of the most powerful tools for personal development.“

What advice would you give to young women who want to find their own path?

Joy and success are closely connected. What brings joy often leads to success and success in turn brings joy. The key is to reflect honestly: Where do I experience flow? What gives me energy? Do I want to lead or be led? With every career decision, it is worth pausing and asking: Is this my own desire or someone else's expectation? Your own path emerges where joy, capability and personal values meet.

My best decision



„After my breakdown, I no longer function on autopilot, but consciously change myself and today I lead not out of control, but out of clarity.“

- Michael Methner, Head of Digital Channels & Services Santander



„Moving to Germany at the age of 24 and taking on a global role at Beiersdorf marked the start of my international career and a professional journey that continues to shape me to this day.“

- Béatrice Guillaume-Grabisch, Board Member L'Oréal



„Not just relying on traditional career paths, but consistently shaping my own path between science, practice, and social engagement.“

- Anja Seng, President FidAR e.V.



„To pursue a career in human resources, because that is where my passion lies.“

- Sophie von Saldern, Global Head of Human Resources Covestro



„Consciously continuing to advance my professional development, even as a mother.“

- Patricia Bernstein, VP Development Workshops Porsche AG



„To have repeatedly jumped in at the deep end and tried everything.“

- Evgeniya Ettinger, Managing Director Accenture



„To emigrate from Syria to Germany with my daughters in order to take up a new position at Henkel and offer them a more secure future here, despite initial difficulties.“

- Hanan Hallal, Corporate Finance Director Henkel



Interview: Evgeniya Ettinger

Curiosity Is My Comfort Zone

A new country. A new language. A degree that suddenly no longer counts. Evgeniya Ettinger learned early on that careers rarely follow a straight line and that this can be a great opportunity. What began as a legal restart in Germany eventually led her into one of the most dynamic industries of our time: the world of technology and data. Today, as Managing Director at Accenture, she is responsible for Data and AI Sales across EMEA, driven by the courage to repeatedly take new paths.

This mindset has also shaped her journey with IWIL. Once a mentee herself, she now supports the next generation of leaders as a mentor. In this interview, she talks about shifting perspectives, building cultural bridges, and why curiosity remains her most reliable comfort zone.

What motivated you as a young woman to leave Russia and start over in Germany?

First and foremost, it was the quality of education. I had studied law in Russia, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a lack of well-established expertise in private law. In Germany, by contrast, legal education was highly structured and practical. That convinced me, because a solid education is the foundation of any career. In addition, many countries, including Japan and Russia, have adopted the German Civil Code as a model. My original plan was to study in Germany and then return to Russia. As is often the case in life, things turned out differently.

Did you face difficulties when you first arrived in Germany?

Absolutely. I arrived without a network, without familiar structures – a real leap into the deep end. My Russian degree was not fully recognized, so suddenly I found myself back in the equivalent of the final year of high school. It was a sobering start. Beyond the bureaucracy, the language was a daily challenge. Culturally, many things felt unfamiliar as well. I had to build a completely new foundation step by step.

Do you still notice cultural differences today?

After more than 20 years, I definitely feel at home here. For my parents, I have become “very German.” Yet there are still small moments when I feel my roots. For example, when paying the bill in a restaurant. In Russia, one person usually pays or people find a spontaneous way to settle it. In Germany, the bill is split very precisely. Or when it comes to meeting friends. In Russia, people might simply drop by and ring the doorbell, whereas in Germany meetings are often planned weeks in advance. These are no longer major differences, but rather subtle cultural nuances that remind me how much I have grown between two worlds.



Portrait Evgeniya Ettinger

When did you decide to move from a legal career into the tech and sales world?

Actually, already during my studies. I quickly realized that the traditional legal career path was not for me. I didn't want to only review and safeguard things. I wanted to create and shape them. At Oracle, I eventually took the leap. In the legal department my scope was limited, so I asked for an opportunity in sales. A colleague simply said, “If it doesn't work out, you can always go back.” That openness made all the difference. I took the chance and quickly realized that this was exactly where I belonged.

What is it like to hold a leadership role as a woman in a male-dominated industry?

You get used to often being the only woman in the room. Especially in IT and sales, teams are still very male dominated. At the beginning it helps to have leaders who support you and stand behind you. Over time, results speak for themselves, particularly in sales where performance is measurable. With every new role, however, you have to build trust again. That is part of the process. The important thing is not to let it discourage you.

How do you stay relevant in such a fast-moving environment as Data and AI?

It is challenging, especially in recent years. I use daily updates to stay informed but focus primarily on what is truly relevant for customers. Many innovations are exciting but not immediately scalable or ready for enterprise use. Key issues include data security, scalability and compliance. One constant topic is data quality. Without clean data, neither AI nor automation can function sustainably.

Which trends in Data and AI will shape companies in the future?

One major topic is agentic AI, meaning AI systems that can autonomously take over processes. At the same time, the data foundation remains crucial. Data platforms, data quality and infrastructure are prerequisites for any AI application. Even if these topics appear less glamorous, they are the basis for real innovation

„I arrived without a network, without familiar structures – a real leap into the deep end.“



Evgeniya giving a presentation on stage

„When someone feels empowered or inspired after meeting me, I consider that a success.“

Where do you find the courage to embrace new changes again and again, such as moving to London?

Curiosity. It is my strongest driver. As soon as something becomes too routine, I ask myself what comes next. For me, standing still does not feel safe, it feels boring. Moving to London was therefore no coincidence. Many innovations in AI appear earlier in the UK than in the EU. If you work in this environment, you want to be close to where things are happening. Germany had been my base for more than 20 years. But at some point I knew it was time to move on.

How do you personally define success?

For me, success means learning something new and expanding my abilities. Equally important is having a positive impact on other people, whether in my professional life, through mentoring or in my personal life. I ask myself every day how I can give something back. If someone leaves a conversation with me feeling stronger or inspired, I consider that success.

What did your time as a mentee at IWIL give you?

I had a wonderful mentor in Nadja Risse. She supported me significantly in my transition from a first-line manager to a second-line manager. Beyond that, the network was incredibly valuable. The exchange with people from different industries and functions broadened my perspective. Many of those connections still exist today.

What do you share with your mentees today as a mentor?

I encourage my mentees to be courageous and to believe in themselves. It is important not to focus only on the next career step but also on the one after that. An attractive title can sometimes turn out to be a dead end. Perspective is crucial. One exercise I like to suggest is writing down three things that brought you joy every day for several weeks. Over time, this creates a personal job profile. You start to see patterns and develop a clearer understanding of what truly suits you in the long run.

What advice would you give to young women working in male-dominated industries?

Do not make yourself dependent on what others think about you. Focus on what you can influence: your performance, your mindset and your goals. If at the end of the day you can say that you gave your best, it was a good day. You cannot control what others think, but you can control your own thoughts and actions.

„You cannot control what others think, but you can control your own thoughts and actions.“



Evgeniya giving a presentation on stage



Interview: Michael Methner

Between Ambition & Awareness

Michael Methner learned the principle of performance from an early age. Growing up in a working-class family, shaped by football and later by a steep career in banking, his path seemed clear for a long time: invest, deliver, perform. Responsibility came early, success quickly. But the higher you fly, the further you can fall.

Today, as Head of Digital Channels and Service at Santander, Michael Methner is responsible for key future topics within the organization. His understanding of leadership has not been shaped solely by speed or titles but by experiences that forced him to rethink performance and success. This mindset is something he now wants to bring to his role as a mentor at IWIL. In this interview, he talks about what happens when personal expectations exceed personal strength and why real strength is often quieter than we think.

Which experiences shaped you most during your younger years?

I come from a working-class family. My father was a bus driver and my mother worked in field sales. The message was clear: if you want to achieve a lot, you have to invest a lot. Outstanding performance was considered normal. This mindset shaped my school years, my vocational training and also my career in football. It became a deeply rooted value within me.

How did you deal with setbacks or defeats?

For a long time, to be honest, I was very used to success. My path went steadily upward. Real setbacks? None. I still received criticism though, mainly from my parents. Even when I performed very well, there was always room for improvement. I accepted recognition as the standard and set the bar extremely high for myself.

Professionally, things moved quickly after my apprenticeship and civil service. I started working in the office of a crafts business, later moved through temporary employment to the Royal Bank of Scotland. In 2009, Santander acquired the German business of the Royal Bank of Scotland and with it my professional home at the time. What had initially been a transition turned into a long-term opportunity. I stayed and continued developing in the new environment.

At Santander I worked my way up through consistent extra effort, from clerk to team leader, department head and eventually division head. Everything happened very quickly. Responsibility came early and the next step often followed immediately. However, that pace came at a cost. My health increasingly took a back seat. I kept functioning and performing until eventually a major setback occurred, one I would not have been able to overcome alone.



Michael playing soccer in his youth

What was the most defining moment in your life so far?

Of course, the birth of my children. But the most defining moment was the diagnosis that my youngest daughter has a severe disability. That was a moment when performance and commitment could not change anything. It was simply reality. Combined with a very demanding job and constant availability, the situation became extremely challenging. My personal expectations were incredibly high. At the same time, my first marriage started to drift apart because we coped with the situation differently. That was a profound turning point and it led me into a very difficult phase of my life.

„I accepted recognition as the standard and set the bar extremely high for myself.“

Who or what helped you during that difficult time?

The turning point did not come immediately. Psychological support initially did not help me very much. The decisive impulse came from a colleague at work, who is now my wife. She told me that I could not continue like this and that otherwise I would not even reach the age of forty. Through the topic of mindfulness, I eventually found a coach who asked me two central questions.

First: What are your needs? I had no answer.

Second: Do you think about your own future or only about your daughter's?

These questions were tough but transformative. They helped me take responsibility for myself and fundamentally change my perspective.

„I kept functioning and performing until eventually a major setback occurred, one I would not have been able to overcome alone.“



Michael together with his wife and two daughters

What does security mean to you, personally and as a leader?

Security means trust, responsibility and vulnerability. As a leader, that means trusting people instead of micromanaging them, taking responsibility for the team and being able to openly admit when you do not have all the answers. Showing vulnerability is not a weakness. On the contrary, it creates an environment in which people feel safe enough to be honest.

How do you create psychological safety while still demanding high performance?

When people know that they are allowed to make mistakes, that they are heard and that they understand the context of decisions, intrinsic motivation emerges. I aim to create transparency around decisions, explain the background and encourage open discussions. Loyalty does not come from short-term incentives but from trust and a sense of belonging. Strong teams are built when people feel safe while also understanding what they are working toward.

What role does your training as a mindfulness coach play in your daily life?

I have established fixed routines, short moments of silence and movement in the morning and evening. Each of them takes only about ten minutes but has a big impact on my performance and sleep quality. At work, mindfulness helps me create a pause between stimulus and reaction. When I rush from one meeting to the next, I consciously take thirty seconds to arrive mentally. That improves my decisions both on a human and a professional level.

What gives you strength and balance outside of work?

Movement. I need physical challenges and a healthy sense of competition. From football to martial arts to CrossFit, running and now Hyrox. Sport helps me regulate stress and gain mental clarity. A fun fact: many of my ideas come to me while running.



Michael at a Hyrox



Michael giving a presentation on stage

How do you connect professional success with personal fulfillment?

I believe in what I do and that is a privileged situation. I have been with Santander for more than twenty years. The development opportunities, the appreciation and the collaboration with highly committed colleagues give me a sense of fulfillment. If I ever felt that my work no longer had meaning, I would consciously look for something new. We spend too much of our lives working to simply endure it.

„You can only give when your own cup is full – that’s what I want to pass on as a mentor.“

Why did you decide to become a mentor at IWIL?

Through previous leadership programs and conversations with colleagues, the opportunity arose to become involved with IWIL. I have great respect for the initiative and the program, so it felt natural for me to become part of it. I also enjoy sharing experiences and at the same time learning a lot about myself and about the next generation of leaders. You can only give when your own cup is full – that’s what I want to pass on as a mentor.

Did you have mentors yourself?

Not formally, but I had role models. One particularly influential person for me was Isabel Tufet. She combines professional strength with humanity. From her I learned openness, trust and leadership without micro-management

What advice would you give someone who is under enormous pressure?

First, pause and reflect honestly. Is it real overload or is it your own expectation that is driving the pressure? Seek feedback from a coach, a friend or a trusted person. Admitting that you have limits requires courage but it is essential. Sometimes it helps more to simply listen rather than immediately offer solutions. The important thing is to recognize the situation early, before physical or psychological symptoms appear.



Interview: Anja Seng

Why Gender Equality Requires Conviction, Action and Courage

For Anja Seng, leadership is not a question of position but of mindset. For more than 25 years, she has moved between academia, corporate practice, and social engagement - as a professor of human resource management, consultant, president of Fi-dAR e.V., and mentor at IWIL. She has witnessed organizations during periods of rapid growth, taken responsibility in times of crisis, and experienced firsthand what structural barriers can mean for a career. In this interview, she speaks about leadership in uncertain times, the glass ceiling, and why lasting change always requires both conviction and action.

What first led you to focus so strongly on human resource management and leadership?

During my studies, I chose human resources and marketing as my areas of specialization. I was fascinated by the question of how companies can become attractive employers. My diploma thesis focused on employer branding - at the time still a relatively new field. Through my work in consulting and the leadership responsibilities I took on early in my career, this gradually became a long-term focus. Today it's clear: companies attract people through their image, but they retain them through good leadership. That's why human resource management and leadership are inseparable.

Why do we need a new understanding of human resource management today?

We are living in a time of enormous uncertainty - geopolitically, economically, and technologically. Digitalization, artificial intelligence, changing work processes, and social tensions are creating a sense of instability. Leaders themselves are under pressure, yet at the same time they are expected to provide stability. That's why human resource management and leadership must focus even more strongly on providing orientation, transparency, and trust.



Anja at the FidAR Forum 2025

Was there a moment in your life that fundamentally changed your perspective on career and responsibility?

Yes, actually several. The first occurred in the late 1990s. I had taken on leadership responsibility for 24 employees in a rapidly growing recruitment consultancy. Everything seemed to be going well - until the dot-com bubble burst. Within a short time, I had to lay off people I had personally hired. That experience made me realize how strongly external conditions shape careers and how much responsibility leadership truly entails.

The second defining moment came later in my career, when I encountered the so-called glass ceiling for the first time. Despite strong performance, the limits were clearly visible. That experience showed me that equal opportunities are not a given and that we must actively work to create fair structures.

What does good leadership mean to you?

Good leadership means listening, building trust, providing guidance, and enabling a culture of learning. Leaders should encourage their teams to try new things and learn from mistakes. It's not about knowing everything better than everyone else, but about creating a partnership-based working environment. Leadership also means supporting people in their development - even if that eventually means letting strong employees move on.

Why is diversity not an additional topic but a core element of a successful organization?

Diversity reflects the reality of our society, and organizations should mirror that reality. At the same time, diversity brings different perspectives - which are particularly important in areas where innovation and change are required. Homogeneous teams tend to generate fewer new ideas. Diverse backgrounds and ways of thinking foster creativity and better solutions. That's why diversity needs to be actively promoted and valued.



Anja Seng with Nicole Riggers and Christina Sontheim-Leven at the Female Network Festival

What obstacles do diversity initiatives still face?

Unconscious bias and the so-called similarity principle are major challenges. People often prefer others who resemble themselves. That's why transparent structures, clear targets, and objective processes - especially in recruiting - are essential. Data and measurable indicators are crucial for making inequalities visible. Only when transparency and concrete goals exist can diversity initiatives have a lasting impact.

Where do you encounter unconscious bias most often in everyday life?

I catch myself falling into it as well. No one is completely free of bias. One example comes from my teaching. A student didn't fit the typical image of a business administration student. At first, she was excluded by others in the class. But she quickly became one of the strongest performers. Her story reminded me how quickly we judge people based on assumptions.

I also encounter bias in everyday situations. For example, at events my husband is sometimes addressed as the professor, even though I am the invited speaker. Fortunately, he usually reacts with humor and points to me with a smile.

Why is your engagement with FidAR and IWIL so important to you?

An early research project and my own experience with the glass ceiling showed me that gender equality cannot be taken for granted. For me, it is a fundamental pillar of democracy. Women make up half of our society - so they should also be proportionally represented in decision-making positions. I realized early on that I wanted to actively contribute to this change. I first became involved with Zonta, then joined FidAR, and later - through Sabine Hansen - became part of IWIL.

FidAR focuses on visibility and political advocacy. It works to highlight structural barriers and initiate change. IWIL goes a step further by working directly within organizations. Through cross-mentoring, exchange, and targeted development programs, women are supported very concretely in advancing their careers. For me, this combination of structural advocacy and personal mentoring is essential. Because real change requires both conviction - and action.

„Because real change requires both conviction - and action.“

Is there a mentoring moment that has stayed with you?

I've met many impressive people through mentoring. One of the most rewarding moments is seeing former mentees become mentors themselves. With some of them, I'm still in contact today. These long-term relationships and the mutual development they create are what make mentoring so valuable to

What does it take to balance career, voluntary engagement and family life?

Honestly, it starts with choosing the right partner. There needs to be a genuine commitment to sharing responsibilities. Without my husband's support, my path would not have been possible. It also requires the willingness to set priorities - even if they don't match traditional expectations. I didn't bake muffins for school events or craft elaborate school cones. Instead of perfection, I chose pragmatism. And yes, sometimes that meant receiving skeptical looks.

But balance doesn't mean doing everything yourself. It means consciously deciding where to invest your energy - and standing by those decisions. It's also important that women stop judging each other based on such details. Support instead of comparison would make things much easier.

What gives you energy and balance outside of work?

Sport. I regularly practice yoga, go running, and do strength training. Physical activity helps me recharge and clear my mind. At the moment, I'm even preparing for a Hyrox competition together with my son - which is quite a challenge.



Anja giving a presentation on stage at VAA Connect 2025

„One of the most rewarding moments is seeing former mentees become mentors themselves.“

What mindset would you like to encourage in women who want to take on responsibility but still hesitate?

Stand by your goals. Enjoy the opportunity to shape things and make peace with the concept of "power." Power simply means influence and the ability to create change. Build fair partnerships and ensure your economic independence. Stay professionally active and avoid long career breaks if possible. And most importantly: be supportive of other women. Encourage one another instead of judging each other.

„And most importantly: be supportive of other women. Encourage one another instead of judging each other.“

My biggest challenge



„Recognizing that my own model for success is driving me into a wall - and taking responsibility for my own part instead of blaming the circumstances.“

- Michael Methner, Head of Digital Channels & Services Santander



„Coping with the loss of my father, my mother, and later my sister - and being there for them in their final moments despite the distance and my life abroad.“

- Béatrice Guillaume-Grabisch, Board Member L'Oréal



„To experience that performance alone is not always enough, because structural limitations and crises also shape careers - and yet to remain capable of acting and confident.“

- Anja Seng, President FidAR e.V.



„Balancing motherhood and career and doing justice to both roles.“

- Sophie von Saldern, Global Head of Human Resources Covestro



„Consciously advancing my professional development, even as a mother.“

- Patricia Bernstein, VP Development Workshops Porsche AG



„Learning to negotiate for myself and overcome the imposter syndrome.“

- Evgeniya Ettinger, Managing Director Accenture



„Emigrating alone with my daughters from Syria to Germany.“

- Hanan Hallal, Corporate Finance Director Henkel



Interview: Patricia Bernstein

The Courage to Take the Next Turn

Careers rarely follow a straight line—and that is often exactly where their greatest strength lies. Patricia Bernstein has repeatedly chosen new paths: from international projects and leadership roles in the automotive industry to her current position as Vice President Development Workshops at Porsche. For her, change has never been a reason to hesitate, but rather a natural step forward.

She also knows both sides of mentoring: once a mentee in the IWIL program herself, she now supports the next generation of leaders as a mentor. In this interview, she reflects on defining moments in her career, on making decisions in uncertain times, and on why it is worth embracing new paths with courage.

If your career path were a film, what would its title be?

It would be difficult to choose just one title—more like an entire portfolio. There have been phases that felt like a series, others full of action, drama, and new beginnings. That mix is exactly what still makes my journey so exciting today. And in my current role at Porsche, with its close connection to motorsport, completely new dimensions have been added. One thing is certain: it never gets boring.

Which stage of your career shaped you most as a leader?

Interestingly, it was a role in which I did not yet have formal leadership responsibility. At the time, I was leading a highly innovative project for which there were neither clear responsibilities nor established references within the company. We had to build the team, define the content, and set the objectives almost entirely from scratch. What I experienced during that time was the incredible energy that can emerge when people truly align behind a shared goal. That experience still shapes my understanding of leadership today: bringing people together and tackling complex challenges as a team is, for me, the core of leadership.



Patricia at the Porsche Headquarter

What excites you most about your current role at Porsche?

The complexity and the diversity. The diversity of topics, tasks, personalities, and areas of expertise fascinates me to this day. I am not an engineer myself but a business economist. Precisely because of that, I learn constantly—when discussing technological and innovative topics with my team, analyzing proposals, understanding problems, and ultimately translating them into decisions. That combination is what makes the role so exciting for me.

„Bringing people together and tackling complex challenges as a team is, for me, the core of leadership.“

When was the first time in your career that you consciously chose a new path without knowing exactly where it would lead?

Actually, that has happened repeatedly. Change is almost the constant in my career. Looking back, I have taken on a new role roughly every three years on average—over more than 20 years, that adds up to quite a few changes. I still remember my first day at Porsche very clearly: it was my first time in Weissach and I did not know a single person there. It was similar when I moved to Mexico. But jumping into the deep end has never been an obstacle for me. A new beginning always comes with great opportunity. You enter without preconceptions, but you have to listen carefully, build relationships, gain trust, and understand how both formal and informal networks work. For me, that is an essential management skill. That is why I always encourage talents to actively seek out and embrace change.

What mindset helps you make decisions even in uncertain situations?

A clear inner compass, a strong value system, integrity, and of course a solid understanding of the regulatory framework in which I operate. For me, a decision must be one that I can explain to my employees, my supervisors, and even the next generation. At the same time, leadership requires the ability to tolerate uncertainty. The greater the responsibility, the more often you must make decisions without knowing all possible outcomes. That is precisely why it is important not to overthink everything. At some point, you simply have to take responsibility for a decision – even if not every question has been answered yet.

How do you recognize a good leader?

They listen, they trust, they support, and they challenge.



Portrait Patricia Bernstein

„I was a mentee at IWiL myself and I am still connected with my former mentor today.“

How do you motivate people to embrace new paths?

By leading by example. I cannot credibly expect something from others that I am not willing to do myself. I also try to remove fear—because fear is a very poor advisor. Instead, I appeal to people’s curiosity and offer a safety net. Anyone who dares to make a bold change needs guidance, support, and the reassurance that they are not alone. And if I notice that someone is reaching their limits, it is my responsibility to step in.

When does leadership require courage rather than security?

In times of innovation, change, and crisis.

Is there a moment or piece of advice from your time as an IWiL mentee that still stays with you today?

There was a conversation with my mentor in which he offered a very critical outside perspective on my employer. He helped me step back from the sense of self-evidence that can develop in large organizations. More importantly, he encouraged me to question things and to speak up about what bothered me—not destructively, but constructively and with the intention of shaping change.

What role can mentoring and networks play in making women more visible?

A very significant one. Cross-industry mentoring programs like IWiL are particularly valuable because there is no transactional relationship between mentor and mentee. Unlike colleagues, supervisors, or even family members, a mentor has no personal stake in a specific decision. That creates real freedom. A good mentor does not say, “Do exactly this.” Instead, they open up new perspectives—even uncomfortable ones. They reflect, challenge, and encourage critical thinking. For that to work, openness, trust, and discretion are essential. When those elements come together, mentoring can be incredibly powerful—for both sides.

I was a mentee at IWiL myself and I am still connected with my former mentor today. At a very important stage of my career, he was an invaluable sparring partner.



Patricia in the Porsche showroom

What would you like to pass on now as a mentor?

First and foremost, I want to create a safe space—a place where topics can be discussed openly without the other person feeling pushed in a particular direction. I want to share experiences, both personal and professional, and provide insights into how I have dealt with certain situations. Sometimes it also helps to think through scenarios together: How would you approach this conversation? What options are available? Openness is particularly important to me in that process.

What advice would you give to women who want to follow their own path but are still hesitant?

Just start. Things do not improve if you keep waiting and overthinking everything. So simply start!

„Things do not improve if you keep waiting and overthinking everything. So simply start!“



Interview: Hanan Hallal

Curiosity as a Compass

She seeks responsibility where others hesitate and embraces change where others prefer security. From Syria to Germany, from national financial leadership to global steering roles at Henkel - her path has never been linear, but always intentional. Today she works where strategy, innovation, and sustainability converge and where numbers tell not only results but also the story of the future.

What guides her is simple: learning instead of standing still, trust instead of control, and the conviction that development is only possible when we embrace change. In this interview, she speaks about staying clear-headed under pressure, why mistakes can build trust, and what she has taken away so far from her time as a mentee at IWIL.

What motivates you every day to take responsibility and make an impact in your role?

I fundamentally believe in personal growth and in learning something new every day. When I feel that I'm learning daily, whether professionally or through interactions with people, it gives me energy. That sense of curiosity and joy in learning motivates me every single day.

What led you to leave your life in Syria and move to Europe with Henkel?

Living in Europe had been a dream of mine for a long time. I was 25 years old, a single mother with two daughters. In Syria, divorce is socially difficult, there is hardly any state support, and I received no help from my ex-husband. My family supported me, but ultimately I carried most of the responsibility alone. My greatest wish was to give my daughters a freer life, in a society where they could grow and develop without cultural limitations. When I was working at Henkel, the opportunity for an international position arose. At the same time, the war in Syria began. The situation became increasingly dangerous, also for my children. In that moment, I received my ex-husband's consent for us to leave the country. It was a difficult context, but the right professional opportunity came at the right moment. That's how I was able to move to Europe with my two daughters.



Hanan at the HKUST Business School

How did you manage the transition to Germany with a new job, a new language and as a single mother?

It was the greatest challenge of my life. Professionally, I moved from a country-level CFO role into a global function at headquarters with responsibility across many countries. At the same time, I deliberately chose a particularly different business unit in order to continue developing professionally.

On a personal level, it was equally difficult. My daughters initially struggled to integrate at school. They felt like outsiders and missed family and friends. We also had to learn many things culturally, from the school system and the weather to the general mindset. There were moments when I questioned whether it had been the right decision. But I kept reminding myself: change is always difficult. Give it time. And that is exactly what we did. Today we feel well integrated, happy, and grateful for the journey we took.

Which experiences, values, or skills from your time in Syria still shape you today, especially in your leadership role?

Above all, warmth and communication. I always try to see the person behind the role. When you understand why someone acts the way they do, collaboration becomes much easier. I grew up in a large family where communication was central. This understanding of interpersonal dynamics helps me a lot, especially in international teams. I also try to maintain a positive mindset and not take things personally. Soft skills and personal attitude continue to evolve throughout life.

Were there moments that fundamentally changed your perspective on life?

The early years in Germany were very challenging and sharpened my perspective on many things. But what truly changed my outlook was the serious illness of a baby in my family. In moments like that, priorities shift dramatically. Suddenly, the next career step no longer matters as much as health, closeness, and time with the people you love. I have always been very ambitious and used to define myself strongly through performance. That experience taught me that professional success alone does not create a fulfilling life. Career goals are important, but they should not dominate everything. Balance is not a weakness, it is the foundation for long-term strength.

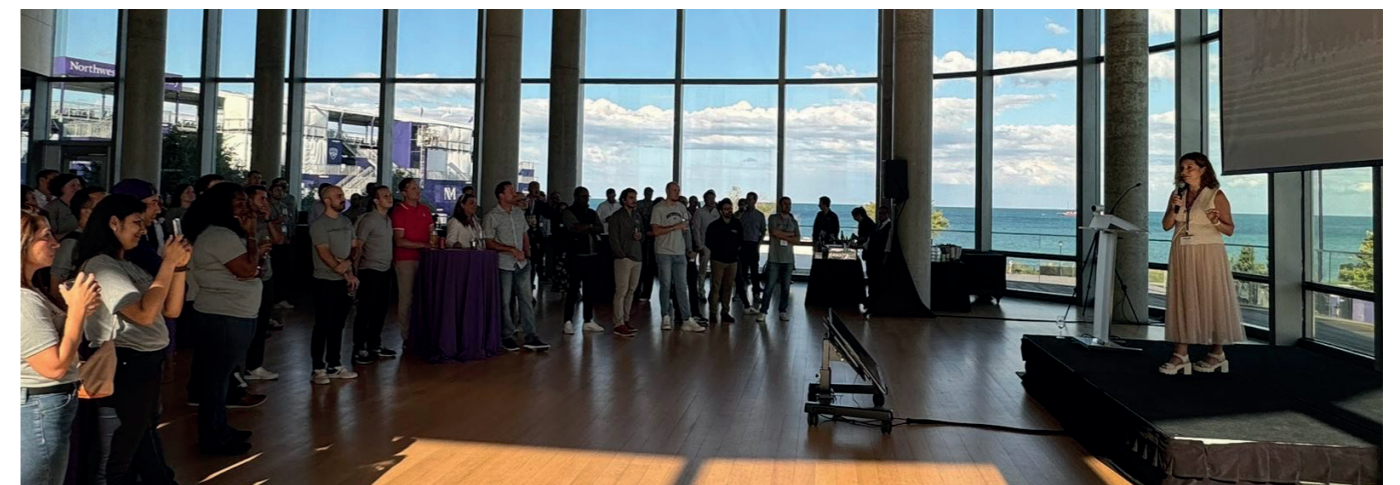
How do you create a culture where mistakes are allowed and learning is natural?

In my team, we introduced a ritual: we celebrate mistakes. In every monthly meeting, each person starts by sharing a mistake they made and what they learned from it. At the beginning, I was the only one openly talking about mistakes. Over time, trust developed. I always tell my team: if you succeed, you receive the recognition. If something fails, I take responsibility. This helps remove the fear of making mistakes. Because mistakes are not the problem, silence is. Communication is the key.

What does agile leadership mean to you and why is it so important right now?

We live in a highly dynamic and volatile world. Economic, geopolitical, and technological changes are happening simultaneously. So agility is a must. For me, agile leadership means providing orientation by clearly defining the "North Star" while at the same time giving people the freedom to act. I believe in feedback in both directions, trust, and continuous learning. Empower them to respond quickly to change.

**„Today I know:
Career goals are important,
but they should not
dominate everything.“**



Hanan giving a talk on stage



Hanan with her family

How do you approach effective stakeholder management?

In the past, I thought corporate politics was something negative. Today I see it differently. Good political skills mean understanding interests and creating win-win situations. Instead of fighting over a piece of the pie, you can work together to make the pie bigger. Sometimes I deliberately let others shine in meetings, even if the original idea came from me. What matters is not who receives the credit, but that the idea is implemented.

„Growth happens through trying things out and through many small mistakes along the way.“

What have you taken away from your time as a mentee at IWIL so far?

I have learned to reflect more deeply and to act more diplomatically. The mentoring program has also helped me involve stakeholders more consciously and lead in a more sustainable way. I am also very grateful for the many inspiring people I have had the chance to meet through the program.

What does mentoring mean to you personally?

Mentoring is part of my daily life. For many years I have supported mentees regularly, both internally and externally. Mentoring is authentic and mutual. Both sides learn. It is about sharing experiences, expanding perspectives, and building meaningful relationships.

How do you maintain balance between your professional and personal life?

Prioritization is key. I consciously plan my week, remove what is not important, and focus on what truly creates impact. Health comes first for me. That is why I start every day with 30 minutes of Pilates, even though I am not naturally an early riser. I also delegate more deliberately to my team. Trust creates space.

What advice would you give to people facing a major change?

See challenges as an investment in your long-term growth. Mistakes are part of the journey. They are not obstacles but part of progress. Question the status quo, think boldly, and keep moving. Those who stand still will be overtaken. Especially in times of AI and rapid technological change, waiting until everything is perfect means starting too late. Growth happens through trying things out and through many small mistakes along the way.

2025 YEAR IN REVIEW



A year full of encounters, inspiration, and shared successes

The year 2025 was shaped by inspiring encounters, new perspectives, and many memorable moments within the IWIL community. Together with our members, mentors, and partner companies, we were able to shape another year defined by exchange, development, and meaningful connections. The year began with our traditional New Year's Lunch with Elmar Thevessen at the Industrie-Club Düsseldorf. Shortly afterwards, the new mentee class started its mentoring year at Schneider Electric, while at the same time we celebrated the successful graduation of the previous cohort at Noerr.

Throughout the year, numerous events created opportunities for dialogue and fresh inspiration. During the summer, alumnae gathered in various cities to share experiences and further strengthen their network. In July, the book presentation by Andreas Krebs at the Wirtschafts-Club Düsseldorf sparked engaging discussions and new ideas. Autumn was marked by particularly inspiring encounters: at the Wine & Cheese Evening with the LeadershipNext Academy at Omnicom Media and at the IWIL Summit at GEA Group, members, mentors, and partners came together to exchange experiences, learn from one another, and develop new ideas.

The year concluded on a festive note with our Christmas Gathering at Zurich Zoo together with Zoom - a wonderful moment to celebrate the end of the year in a special atmosphere. Our heartfelt thanks go to all members, mentors, and partner companies. Your commitment, support, and dedication to empowering women in leadership made this year truly special. With this energy, we look forward to the year ahead - and to many more encounters, ideas, and shared successes.



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