

The Journey to 50/50™

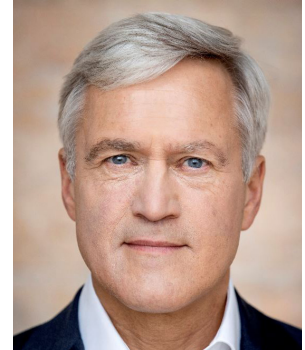
A series of articles in which CEOs share their experiences of moving their companies towards gender equality.



Frans Muller, President and CEO, Ahold Delhaize

Career snapshot

I began my career at KLM Cargo and worked at METRO Group before joining Delhaize Group, which then became Ahold Delhaize in 2016. I've worked in multiple regions, such as Western and Central-Eastern Europe, CIS and Southeast Asia, with people from different backgrounds and cultures. I've always enjoyed working with diverse teams, with a mix of genders and ethnicities, because they have given me important perspectives and understanding and improved the quality of decision-making.



Ahold Delhaize's D&I journey

D&I has always been a fundamental part of Ahold Delhaize. This is because we have a diverse customer base, and employ more than 400,000 associates across many countries, where we want to reflect the markets we serve. We know that D&I makes us stronger and enables us to do the right things for our business, and more importantly, for our people. In 2017, we formalised our daily practice in a strategy which is focused on diversifying our workforce, building an inclusive workplace, and connecting with a diverse marketplace. Understanding that this change was needed more broadly in the industry as well, we became the first signatory of the LEAD Network CEO Pledge. We then re-signed it in 2020 and enhanced our partnership with NEW in the US. We got our brands even more connected with this topic and have begun to measure our success, starting with inclusion. Because if you can't measure and you don't have accountability in place for leaders, then it's not going to happen.



Our total workforce across our various brands is 54% female, but as you go up the pyramid there are fewer female leaders. We all know this, but it's still a regret of mine because there is no quick fix. Each of the Ahold Delhaize brands is working hard to remove barriers for women and build a more inclusive pipeline of potential leaders. We value our partners, like the LEAD Network – because as retailers, manufacturers, service providers and country groups, we can all learn a lot from each other.

Ahold Delhaize's approach

We focus a great deal of time and effort on inclusion. Our approach is about more than just gender, it's about LGBTQ+, race, ethnicity, age and the many other factors of diversity – we want to make sure everyone feels welcome and at home here. We have set a bold ambition for ourselves to be 100% gender balanced, 100% reflective of the markets we serve, and 100% inclusive every day. And we're treating this like a business initiative, putting strong metrics in place and expecting buy-in and commitment from our leaders, while at the same time providing education and support to build the right culture.

Learning 1: Take a stand

D&I starts at the top and is owned by all business leaders. It must be genuine, visible, and proven by our own behaviour – when leaders get involved and make the issue prominent, that's very powerful. That's why I always urge leaders to step up. Through discussions about D&I I came to feel I had something to contribute to the LEAD Network. We sat down together to talk about what was needed, and we concluded that we had to make sure CEOs were driving this themselves, and that's how the CEO Pledge and the CEO Roundtable came into being.

Learning 2 : Listen and learn

There are so many myths and stereotypes related to gender that simply are not true. Incredibly, sometimes I still hear arguments that women do not want to be promoted or that they are not interested in progressing. I believe these arguments are nonsense. Leaders need to gain a deeper understanding of each individual and what makes them tick. Everyone is unique, and it is the leader's job to bring out the complementary strengths of their teams.

Learning 3 : Diverse teams have more fun

Diverse teams aren't just more effective, they are also much more fun. You get humour, creativity, different insights, better solutions, deeper discussions. I learned this myself during my time working in different countries; it's nice to see a blend of people working together from unique backgrounds. When you get that, you see a positive impact on business performance. You also realise a lot of values are universal, like listening, respect, and collaboration.

Next steps for Ahold Delhaize

Ahold Delhaize and our brands are committed to continually raising the bar on our D&I ambitions. The next steps for us as a company are:

- Continuing the focus on our 100/100/100 ambition;
- Delivering on our strategic focus areas of workforce, workplace, and marketplace with an enhanced emphasis on accountability, inclusive leadership training, pay equity, and balanced slates;
- Putting the right measures in place and holding leaders accountable for delivering their D&I goals.

Next steps for our industry

D&I is no longer a nice-to-have, it's a top business priority and should be handled that way. With the murder of George Floyd last year, another alarm went off in society. We had many honest conversations across our business, and we heard things we'd not heard before. One African American colleague said her son watched the video of the murder and asked her, "Is that my future?" It was heart-breaking and very emotional for everyone. I hope all of this will continue to fuel and energise our D&I knowledge for the good of society. Discussions about inclusivity are easier post-COVID – our eyes are open, and we have better awareness of the necessity. I'm even more determined than three years ago to talk about this as a priority, to make it a topic, and to broaden the circle.



Frans Muller was the first signatory of the LEAD Network CEO Pledge

Contact us

We hope you have found this article useful. Please share your feedback with Mick Broekhof at mick.broekhof@lead-eu.net or Sharon Jeske at sharon.jeske@lead-eu.net. If you are not already a LEAD Network member, we hope you will consider joining us. We have a fast-growing membership of more than 12,000, all of whom are committed to our mission: to attract, retain and advance women in the retail and consumer goods industry in Europe through education, leadership and business development. Visit our website www.lead-eu.net to find out more.

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