

The Journey to 50/50™

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



Dr Ilham Kadri, CEO, Solvay

Career snapshot

Since March 2019, I have been the CEO and President of the Executive Committee of Solvay, a 160-year-old science company headquartered in Belgium. I am fortunate to have a career that has taken me to four continents, working for companies such as Shell, Dow, Sealed Air and, just prior to Solvay, Diversey (USA) as President and CEO. I have a degree in chemical engineering from L'École des Hauts Polymères, Strasbourg, and a PhD in macromolecular physics and chemistry from the Louis Pasteur University, Strasbourg. I'm also a former member of LEAD Network's Advisory Board.



Solvay's D&I journey

We currently have 24.6% women at mid- and senior-level management, and women make up 43% of our board of directors. In 2020, we announced our 2030 sustainability roadmap, *Solvay One Planet*, which includes a goal to reach gender parity for mid- and senior-level management in the next decade and another to extend globally our parental leave to 16 weeks, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. I am very proud to say we *fulfilled this goal* in January 2021 – because if you want to help women get to the top, you need to give their partners the opportunity to support them during critical periods of their lives, such as welcoming or adopting a new child.



As soon as I joined Solvay, we adopted a new Code of Business Integrity, banning any form of discrimination, which all employees must read, agree to and sign. I appointed a Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, who reports directly to me, to foster an inclusive and equitable work environment that, in turn, attracts diversity of thought, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability and sexual orientation. Because without inclusive workplaces, without equality, we won't attract and retain diversity. Diversity is what you see, inclusion and equity is what you do.

Solvay's approach

We launched *Solvay One Dignity* in May 2021 and it is the most ambitious roadmap I have ever adopted. It includes nine 2025-2030 objectives. For example, for every top-100 role, I ask the team to ensure that at least 50% of the candidates come from under-represented or minority groups. To reach our goal of having leaders who nurture an inclusive mindset, we provide assessment and development programmes to employees. And our leaders' incentives are tied to how they have contributed to our DEI goals.

I believe education and awareness are key. We offer a wide range of training on issues such as unconscious bias, burnout, and mindfulness, and we launched the Solvay Academy, a virtual learning platform that allows each of us to self-educate and work on skills gaps. This is something I've dreamed about setting up my whole career. We've also started sending around 150 women per cohort on an external, 100-day intensive training programme called *The A Effect* (A for Ambition). The feedback I've received from the first cohorts is outstanding. Women are fired up and more motivated than ever to grow professionally.

Learning 1: Dream big

A dream becomes an ambition when it is so big that it scares you, but you go after it. As the CEO of Solvay, I find it very important to have dreams and ambitions that go beyond what you would or could achieve on your own. I have the opportunity and the privilege to have an impact on worldwide matters like equality for every daily decision I make. Putting human dignity first is one of my biggest ambitions. I believe that companies that respect human dignity are the ones that will thrive, prosper and last.

Learning 2 : Be a role model

I've faced many glass ceilings in my career as I've worked in several male-dominated fields, in regions such as the Middle East, and have become CEO of a traditional industrial company. If I don't help my successors, who will? I want to leave a legacy where my company is representing the world we are in. In fact, since our parental leave extension, many employees have felt comfortable coming out to their colleagues because they know they are strongly supported by me and the leadership team. They are safe and protected by the company's policies.

Learning 3 : Go public with your goals

You can't just announce diversity goals from a branding and window-dressing perspective; you need back-up from the board of directors and the full support of the senior leadership teams. If you have everything in place including incentives and your targets are credible, there is no shame in going public about what you're trying to do, regardless of the starting point. It becomes a competitive advantage for the company and it will attract more underrepresented and minority groups, including women.



Ilham meets Solvay employees on Citizen Day in Brussels

Next steps for Solvay

There is plenty of ongoing work to reach the nine goals within Solvay One Dignity and foster a 'speak-up' culture, drive salary equality, and attract and retain diverse talent in order to unleash the potential of the company. We want to create and keep nurturing a pipeline of diverse talents, and become an employer of choice for the younger generation. Finally, we've had important discussions with some of our clients who are interested in our approach, and this inspires us to keep thinking about how we can extend our goals to our entire value chain, while bonding with our partners and clients around common values.

Next steps for our industry

We do have a long way to go, especially in attracting diversity in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field. DEI issues are increasingly being taken seriously by many companies and industries. The demographics within an organisation need to represent the company's customers, operational locations, consumers and end clients. Finally, DEI is not about charity, it's about competitiveness, innovation and profitability.

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.