

The Journey to 50/50™

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



Per Strömberg, CEO of ICA Gruppen

Career snapshot

Early in my career I was active in the military as well as working as a healthcare assistant at a hospital. Both these workplaces had a single-gender workforce and the limitations that come with homogenous groups. Since then I have tried to create organisations where power and resources are allocated equally, where norm-breaking is encouraged, and where corporate culture is more inclusive. I became CEO of ICA Gruppen in 2012.



ICA Gruppen's D&I journey

In our management team we have already achieved gender equality among staff managers, while one third of our line managers are female. This is better than our peers: if you look at the top management of Swedish listed companies, only one in seven line managers are women. Achieving higher gender equality has a significant value in itself. But do we actually become more innovative by adding another person to the management team who, beyond their gender, has the same background, education, age and experience? Probably not. The ability to innovate requires a willingness to think differently, which in turn needs an awareness of conformity and its limitations. Another important point is that, just as a male-only management team doesn't necessarily reflect men as a group, we can't expect one or more women on a management team to be a voice for all women. We must also bear in mind that there are those who won't identify themselves based on binary gender norms, and take steps to be inclusive here too.



ICA Gruppen's approach

ICA Gruppen takes a holistic approach to diversity, looking at our role as a company, as an employer and as a member of society. We are a leader in the Swedish grocery retail market, and we can and should use our strong voice to nudge society as a whole in a positive direction. We have come quite far simply by listening to others, acknowledging our shortcomings, facing our biases and being open to new behaviour. We continue to take bold new steps every day.

Learning 1: Ensure equal allocation of power and resources

One of the many areas we regularly evaluate is the allocation of power and resources in the Group. A survey by McKinsey shows that the best-performing companies are those where women have profit-and-loss responsibility. We want women to have equal access to these roles. If we look at school grades or the most common degrees for future leaders, there is no lack of high-performing women; quite the contrary.

Learning 2: See the whole picture

At ICA Gruppen, we want to become even better at attracting a wider range of profiles. We want to be more inclusive, not just with regard to gender, but also ethnicity and culture. This requires that we remove the invisible obstacles that may exist, in the form of exclusion and narrowly defined norms. There are a number of reasons for discrimination which interact with and reinforce each other, such as social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, nationality, experience, personality and education. With the right glasses on and a strict focus on competence, we are able to identify more effective measures and be more inclusive, both in our recruiting and in our existing organisation.

Learning 3 : Tackle unconscious bias

We all tend to perceive the same behaviour differently depending on the person in question, and we expect a certain type of leadership from women and another from men. But as we trend toward more data-driven work, we are forced to accept that our personal assumptions have to take a backseat to more informed decisions. As more people realise this, it can pave the way for new ways of working in areas where we otherwise tend to be overconfident in our ability to be neutral, such as recruiting and hiring, marketing or product development. At ICA Gruppen, our executive managers and their respective management teams have attended workshops on unconscious bias. Although I consider myself to be a self-aware person with an open mind, a test I took as part of these workshops showed that I had several biases I was not aware of – biases that I now see more clearly and can actively battle.

Next steps for ICA Gruppen

Inclusion naturally means giving everyone the right to be themselves, but we must also ensure that we realise the enormous potential diversity can bring. For example, there is significant ethnical and cultural diversity among the pharmacists working at our drugstores, and we need to harness these employees' language skills and insights into shopping habits to improve our marketing and product development. Similarly, we need to use the broad age range within our teams to inform the design of our e-services. At ICA Gruppen, entrepreneurship is one of our core values, and our next step is to do better at capturing new ideas and bold initiatives.

Next steps for our industry

In times of crisis, companies may feel pressured to shift their focus away from areas such as D&I, which are seen as less business-critical. But companies that are able to maintain their focus will be tomorrow's winners. Major societal shifts are often gradual, and those businesses that decide to wait until conditions are exactly right may be too late. As an industry, we must convince nay-sayers by using solid data and good examples to demonstrate indisputably the link between gender equality, diversity, inclusion and profitability. We must continue to measure what can be measured, evaluate our results and compare our KPIs. I would also encourage men in the industry to more actively represent these issues, which benefit us all.

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 10,000, 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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On behalf of ICA, Petra Albuschus, Chief HR Officer, accepts the 2019 LEAD Network award for the top-performing retailer with 50% women in leadership roles.