

The Journey to 50/50™

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



Alan Jope, CEO of Unilever

Career snapshot

Having joined Unilever as a marketing trainee straight out of university, I've spent my whole career with the company, becoming CEO in 2019. During that time I spent 14 years in North America; led the business in China and North Asia; and headed up the Beauty & Personal Care Division. I'm a graduate of Edinburgh University, Scotland, and Harvard Business School, and am married with three children. My kids are global citizens and digital natives; they are an inspiration for me and a hint of what the future holds.



Unilever's D&I journey

We currently have ten non-executive Board members, five men and five women. They are from ten different nationalities, we have three ethnically Asian women and one black man. Of our 14,000 managers, 51% are women, compared with 38% ten years ago. Our tea gardens in Africa have increased women in management from 12% to 32% in two years. These changes didn't happen by chance. Achieving a gender-balanced workforce is one of the goals within the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, launched in 2010. Today, our vision is to be the global leader in sustainable business, and part of this is to be a beacon for equality, inclusion and belonging. In 2019, Unilever signed the CEO Pledge and received the LEAD Network award for top-scoring manufacturer in the European Gender Diversity survey.



Unilever's approach

We have a model for change which we use on gender equality and on other important issues like our carbon footprint.

The model is in three concentric rings:

- At the core is getting our own house in order
- Then, having an impact in our value chain, through our suppliers and distributors
- Lastly, trying to make an impact in society, through our brands and advocacy work

Learning 1 : Lead from the top, and set targets

We have a Global Diversity Board, which I chair and which most of our Exec sit on. This Board sets the strategy, policies and 'tone from the top'. It is backed up by rigorous application of targets. These targets have allowed us to pinpoint hot-spots: parts of the business where progress has been too slow, whether that is in certain functions, geographies or even individuals. One example of these targets is our Gender Appointment Ratio – the gender split of a leader's appointments over five or ten years, regardless of the role they have been in.

Learning 2 : Adopt and invent progressive policy

We have worked hard to implement progressive policies. For example, we have a global mandate on minimum maternity leave standards, and have introduced three weeks' paternity leave globally. We also welcome all kinds of flexible working. Our approach is: the answer is yes, now what's your idea? We have job shares, flexi time, sabbaticals. COVID will increase flexibility in the longer term – we have proved we can operate with 100% at-home working for all office-based staff. When it comes to recruitment, we ensure we always have balanced slates. It's inconceivable to make an appointment without at least one woman and one man on the final slate; this has led to some surprising candidates and some wonderful, unexpected appointments.

Learning 3 : Constantly improve culture

We are on a constant journey to try to improve our culture. We believe that, as a company, your culture is defined by the worst behaviour that you are prepared to tolerate. We call these things out to make clear to our own people – and to those who may be thinking of joining us – the kind of business we want to be. We have coaching and training to help tackle bias, including in our recruitment process. We also celebrate our senior women role models, for example, Unilever's biggest factory site, in Hefei, China, is run by a highly successful woman, Ma Young Mei. At the same time, I know we don't have all the answers. And we certainly do have a long way still to go.

Next steps for Unilever

Half our Board and half our managers may be women, but at the most senior executive levels, only somewhere between one quarter and one third are women. This is not good enough. I hold myself accountable on this and we're going to get there. We also know that gender is just one part of the equality equation. Our D&I priorities now extend to the LGBTQI+ community, to race and to people with disabilities. We will become the world's preferred employer for people with disability and we will do it because there is a hard business case, just as with gender. This is not moral conscience, it's business common sense.

Next steps for our industry

McKinsey has warned of the 'regressive effect on gender equality' of the pandemic and its economic fallout. It's vital that we don't allow the events of 2020 to set us back at a time when we desperately need to continue moving forward. Change is made more possible by working closely across sectors with partners. Unilever collaborates with like-minded companies; civil society; organisations like UN Women, and academia, including some of the big management schools, like Harvard and INSEAD, where in the past we endowed a €3m fund for research on diversity and leadership.



On behalf of Unilever, Hanneke Faber, President Global Foods & Refreshment, accepts the 2019 LEAD Network award for top-scoring manufacturer in the European Gender Diversity survey

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 9,000, 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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