

Sylvie Nicol of Henkel: “Always keep learning”

Having an entrepreneurial corporate culture, underpinned by a deep sense of purpose, provides a strong platform for developing and retaining talent in times of change marked by digitalization and sustainability.



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Sylvie Nicol, Executive Vice President of Human Resources, Infrastructure & Sustainability at

Henkel, started out in the marketing department at Henkel in her home country of France, figuring she would spend her career working in marketing. But when the opportunity arose to become sales director, she found she loved that role even more.

“The chance to drive business and financial responsibility, as well as head a big team, was really fulfilling,” she says. “Yet I always felt there was more I could do that would be in sync with my own purpose of working with people.”

Luckily, Henkel has a strong corporate culture of recognizing talent and developing its people, so when Nicol pushed in the direction of human resources, she was supported in making that move, which included relocating from France to Düsseldorf, where the German chemical and consumer goods company has its global headquarters.

Hers may not be the traditional career path, “but it was my dream and I was given an opportunity to pursue it,” she says happily.

“Pioneers at heart for the good of generations” is both Henkel’s purpose statement as well as being the subject of her talk at IESE’s Global Alumni Reunion on [Elevated Entrepreneurship](#).

Here, she reflects on the importance of having an entrepreneurial corporate culture, underpinned by a deep sense of purpose, which has — unusually in this volatile, job-hopping market — carried her through three decades at the same company.

How did you come to see human resources as your dream job?

I began to lead larger and larger teams of people. And when you scale up teams, you learn more about leadership. The more I learned, the more passionate I became about recruiting, training and coaching, but also about the impact that such leadership can have on an organization, in terms of big topics such as diversity and sustainability.

I realized how much you can change things, although not all leaders do. I wanted to be one of the leaders who did.

There’s a lot of talk nowadays about purposeful leadership. What does this mean to you?

It can be a bit of a buzzword, but in its essence I believe it means that leadership is not only about *what* you know or do, but *how* you do it. How you guide the organization. How inspiring you are. How aware you are of the world around you. How open to new generations and expectations. How self-reflective you are. How you deal with setbacks. How vulnerable you

are. All of these elements take up more space in leadership today.

And it's about learning. When it comes to leading individuals, you need to be in [a permanent process of learning](#).

How has being a member of the executive board affected the kind of impact you can have?

I feel like I'm in the right place, doing the right thing, and able to really help drive the strategy of the company forward, in the right direction. And as we pursue our obligations to be competitive, we are clear that sustainability matters. We hold these two realities together by keeping innovation constantly alive.

Innovation doesn't just mean new or improved products; it's the processes that drive the business.

For example, we offer end-to-end analyses of the carbon footprints, not only of the elements used in our products, but also of the households using our products: that, too, is innovation. Innovation lies not only in what we will launch onto the market next week, but in deciding which ideas we will drive forward, and how.

What else should all companies have on their agenda right now?

Generative AI is on everyone's lips. While I'm not convinced that GenAI will take people's jobs, I do believe that people who don't adapt to it are in danger of losing out, which is a different way to think about upskilling and learning. We need to accept that the biggest technological revolution we have ever seen is here to stay, and educate ourselves.

Related to this is a large-scale project we're pursuing: company-wide digitalization. It's what we call an unavoidable opportunity.

In terms of the HR function, AI can certainly help us get better and more efficient at processing data. For example, we receive 800,000 resumes globally every year, and AI can be leveraged to review candidates much faster.

The other aspect is digitalizing the workforce more generally and guaranteeing everyone access to digital information. For a company like ours, with thousands of our workforce in factories rather than offices, this is an important task.

Do you find employees receptive to training or is there fear and resistance?

A few years ago, we conducted a big digital assessment across the entire company. Since then, we have been providing training across different functions and divisions. At the beginning, there were some fears. People can feel a bit ridiculous at times, a bit out of date.

I experienced this myself with something as simple as Instagram. I wasn't an early adopter, but then it became important for my work. The difficulty with adapting to a new technology is that you feel like the one person who doesn't know, which then makes you feel isolated. So often, people are afraid simply because they imagine something is terribly complex — more complex than it actually is.

Needless to say, I learned to use Instagram. Equally, the experience taught me something important about the learning process itself: Digitalization drives within companies should be about helping people get acquainted with the new technology and lowering barriers. People are smart. They'll figure it out if you remove the fear factor and show them how it will help them to do their jobs even better.

What is another key challenge in HR?

Working and leading across generations. This requires really understanding what managers and employees want, what motivates them, which may be different from what motivated you.

For example, the very concept of growth. For my generation, growth at work was vertical — it meant getting more responsibilities and more recognition. For Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012, so those in their 20s or about to enter the workforce), growth means something completely different: experiences, and the ability to do things through their work that they might not otherwise be able to do.

A lot of misunderstandings can arise if older managers are asked to facilitate opportunities for their Gen Z staff that they never thought about or ever considered desirable. We see this regularly in our China operations, where Gen Z make up a quarter of the workforce. It takes understanding and strategy to bridge these gaps.

Do you have a role model for what you hope to be in terms of leadership?

I would have to say my father. Our careers are vastly different but he always believed in sticking to your values and being able to look yourself in the mirror after any decision you make; being true to yourself and stepping back when you can't be. This attitude has shaped me significantly.

So your final words of advice would be to embrace change while always staying true to what you believe in?

Absolutely! And always keep learning. Remember that your company is full of experts in their respective fields. For anything that you are trying to implement — sustainability, for instance — there may well be people around you who have been working for years on the very same issue that you are now trying to bring to the surface.

Never underestimate the quality of the people you have in your company. Find ways to make them visible, and help them to drive progress for the company and for society as a whole.

In 2024 IESE marks 25 years partnering with Henkel on Custom Programs for Senior Executives, with a special celebration in Düsseldorf. To find out about the many ways IESE collaborates with leading global organizations to deliver transformational learning journeys tailored to their business leaders' needs, check out our [Custom Programs](#).

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