

Published in Authority Magazine



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Jul 26, 2022 · 11 min read · Listen



Power Women: Susanne Caspar of Linnea SA On How To Successfully Navigate Work, Love and Life As A Powerful Woman

An Interview With Ming Zhao



Accept the rules of the game. You cannot work independent of established rules and structures. It is only by accepting them as a foundation and adapting that you can be in a position to create new rules.

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How does a successful, strong, and powerful woman navigate work, employee relationships, love, and life in a world that still feels uncomfortable with strong women? In this interview series, called "Power Women" we are talking to accomplished women leaders who share their stories and experiences navigating work, love and life as a powerful woman.

As a part of this series I had the distinct pleasure of interviewing Susanne Caspar, CEO of Linnea SA a GMP certified botanical API producer in Switzerland.

Susanne Caspar is the CEO of Linnea SA, a manufacturer of active pharmaceutical ingredients and natural botanical extracts. She has been CEO at Linnea for 2 years and prior to this she has held prestigious leadership positions in various pharmaceutical companies including Whitehall-Much (Now Pfizer), Merck Darmstadt, Steiner Arzneimittel and Schaper & Brümmer. Under her leadership at Linnea cannabinoid products have come to the forefront of importance and she is excited for Linnea to be contributing positively to the growth of the cannabis



Ming S. Zhao

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Co-founder and CEO of PROVEN Skincare. Ming is an entrepreneur, business strategist, investor and podcast host.

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Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood “backstory”?

I was born in Bochum, a city in North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany.

Together with my younger sister, we grew up in a sheltered environment. I graduated from high school as well as university with a degree in biology in Bochum.

Can you tell us the story about what led you to this particular career path?

I already had a mind of my own when I was at school. Both parents were born during the war, went to school in the post-war period, and had no opportunity to obtain a higher education themselves. In order not to overburden me they wanted to send me to an easier school, despite the school's recommendation otherwise. With the necessary will and a fair amount of persistence, I convinced my parents to allow me to have a more advanced education and to take the Abitur. This is a prestigious type of advanced education in Germany.

I also developed a particular penchant early on for deliberately “penetrating” so-called male domains. It started when I was the only girl in my class to choose physics for my A-levels, and during a school project week I preferred to study the Otto engine rather than paint colorful pictures.

I still had to listen to the male chauvinists at university saying that I would end up leaving university, never working and only becoming a wife and mother.

Such experiences leave their mark; make you motivated in your mind and in your life to fulfill your ambitions and dreams even more.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

After finishing my studies, I decided not to work as a biologist, and to have a more dynamic career start at the entry level in the marketing department of a pharmaceutical company. This was a landmark decision for my career today. I went through the classic career in pharmaceutical marketing and acquired the tools for more demanding tasks during this time. In my next position as head of marketing for a large international pharmaceutical group, I took on personal responsibility for many seasoned, experienced and sometimes older employees.

These were very big shoes to fill at this time in my career and gave me substantial responsibility and leadership experience at a young age, which proved very valuable to my career over the years.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

One trait is to be courageous. Wherever people want or need to change things, risks arise and there is always the danger of failure. “Don't be afraid of moving forward, be afraid of standing still”. With this Chinese wisdom, I would like to motivate people to act courageously and yet also in a balanced way. A perfect example of this in my own career is making the choice to become CEO of Linnea and moving to Switzerland for this position. I needed to exercise my own courage to leave my home country, learn a new language and culture, and also take on this leadership role at a new company.

As a leader, avoiding decisions with risk potential is a sure way to get stuck in mediocrity. No successful enterprise, including one's own career development, can develop without steps into a new unknown terrain. A great example of this is helping Linnea, the company where I am CEO, to invest

example of this is helping Linnea, the company where I am CEO, to invest substantially in the cannabinoid industry. The company has been in business 40 years now making botanical ingredients and shifting our focus to this new emerging market is an exciting development for a pharmaceutical company.

The third trait that has proven invaluable is flexibility. As a leader you must be able to adapt and pivot in both small and big ways. Companies, people, and markets are fluid and organic and being able to shift and make changes as the need arises is crucial to my success. In the cannabinoid industry for example where we are now focusing a substantial amount of our work at Linnea the regulations can change. Countries will add laws and rules that can be quite specific and small and also quite large like Novel food requirements in Europe and the UK. We must sometimes create partnerships with other companies and organizations instead of working alone and be incredibly flexible and agile to be able to be successful in this type of highly regulated market. Since Linnea is a pharmaceutical company and pharma is also my background I find that flexibility and adaptability is inherent with pharma.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. The premise of this series assumes that our society still feels uncomfortable with strong women. Why do you think this is so?

Society has a certain idea of what the traits of a woman are and what the traits of a man are. The traits that a woman is said to have are, among other things, caring and nurturing. These are both traits that are not initially expected of a manager in a company and can be perceived in a man's world as weakness, where assertiveness and decisiveness, among other things, are required, which are more often attributed to men.

Women frequently have to prove themselves to be smarter and better than men in a man's world. Women who are assertive and are strong leaders can lead to women being perceived as unfeminine and too power-oriented. Whereas, the same actions in men would be respected.

Furthermore, it is difficult if only one or two women have to prove themselves in a group of men. Women and men react differently to many things and that is good. But when only one woman in a group of men reacts differently, it causes alienation. It is only when there are three women in a

group that people no longer question what the "woman" is saying, and then it is easier to have objective discussions. Diversity is essential to having a balanced reaction and discussion without character judgment.

Without saying any names, can you share a story from your own experience that illustrates this idea?

You can check the board members or the management of big companies listed on the stock exchange. When you find only one woman on the board or in an executive position on a management team with mostly men and you are happy that finally a woman has made it to the top, unfortunately you see very often that they don't stay long. When women stand alone at the top or more than one woman, the chances are much better that they will not be removed or replaced faster.

What should a powerful woman do in a context where she feels that people are uneasy around her?

I had a time when I looked at men rather negatively for what they did, with a shake of the head. I realized early on I don't want to be like that.

I took part in a very interesting seminar that opened my eyes. If I want to have a career, I have to know the rules of the game. If I play by my own rules, we will not be able to play together. In addition, very importantly, I must not judge. If I want to order a cappuccino in a foreign country, I should know the vocabulary for it and not insist on my vocabulary. If I think of the "man's world" today as another language that is also interesting, I no longer have any problems learning and using the "new vocabulary". This was just a change in my attitude and I did not have to leave any of my values behind.

Women like to throw themselves into professional/technical topics in order to excel. But they need to understand that this is often not the main focus, because there is always a hidden agenda. Often there are power games in the background and then professional issues are put on the back burner until the power issues are clarified.

What do we need to do as a society to change the unease around powerful women?

I am convinced that we have to introduce the women's quota. In many places in Europe, like Germany, this is something that is practiced in some areas. We won't get anywhere with self-imposed obligations. Only when we have achieved a 50:50 distribution in management positions and certain normality has been established, will we be able to do without a quota. It must become the norm to have mixed teams. Neither an all-male nor an all-female team will be as successful as mixed teams. Men and women have different strengths and this is a good thing and should be used. For this, we need a balance of male and female competences and skills at leadership and decision-making levels.

In my own experience, I have observed that often women have to endure ridiculous or uncomfortable situations to achieve success that men don't have to endure. Do you have a story like this from your own experience? Can you share it with us?

I remember earlier in my career when I was being considered for a promotion to a bigger leadership role there was also one of my male colleagues being considered. I was presented with many interviews and case studies I needed to prepare to be considered for this role, including a presentation to the all male executives. I learned that my male counterpart who was being considered only needed to do one interview for this role and none of the other work I was being asked to do. Frequently there is this imbalance with what is asked of men and women in order to prove they can do the work and handle a position.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by women leaders that aren't typically faced by their male counterparts?

Women often have to work harder to get in a leadership position.

If application documents are forwarded to the respective boards without a picture and without a name that reveals gender or nationality, the chance is more even that a woman or another nationality will get the job.

There is a great deal of bias men have that women do not have a strong enough character or decisiveness to be leaders, so they must constantly overcome this preconceived categorization.

Let's now shift our discussion to a slightly different direction. This is a question that nearly everyone with a job has to contend with. Was it difficult to fit your personal and family life into your business and career? For the benefit of our readers, can you articulate precisely what the struggle was?

I need to say that I had no big struggle. One issue is when both partners in a relationship are in leadership positions and then want to find a job in the same region. Then only seeing your partner, friends and family on weekends can be a challenge as well as having the flexibility with your family to move countries. Since I don't have children, only my partner had to move with me and he did.

What was a tipping point that helped you achieve a greater balance or greater equilibrium between your work life and personal life? What did you do to reach this equilibrium?

I try to do everything I do with pleasure. Of course, the work is not always fun, there are always tasks that are more difficult than others.

But if I have to torture myself every day to go to work, then I have to change

but I have to torture myself every day to go to work, then I have to change something. My life is too short for most of my day to be torture.

And it is very important that there is not only work. Hobbies and friendships must also be cultivated. I play bridge, like to read and, of course, sport should not be neglected. All things that clear the mind are most valuable to reach this balance.

I work in the beauty tech industry, so I am very interested to hear your philosophy or perspective about beauty. In your role as a powerful woman and leader, how much of an emphasis do you place on your appearance? Do you see beauty as something that is superficial, or is it something that has inherent value for a leader in a public context? Can you explain what you mean?

I once read a study that said that good-looking and, above all, well-groomed people with good manners have an easier time making the next career move. I think clothes make the person, they can convey who you are and what you want in life. Therefore I think it's essential to try to dress and behave according to the position you have and want in your career.

How is this similar or different for men?

I think this truly applies to men and women equally.

Ok super. Here is the main question of our interview. Based on your opinion and experience, what are the "Five Things You Need To Thrive and Succeed as a Powerful Woman?" (Please share a story or example for each.)

1- Accept the rules of the game. You cannot work independent of established rules and structures. It is only by accepting them as a foundation and adapting that you can be in a position to create new rules.

2- Having power is not a negative. Being in positions of leadership can allow you as a woman to empower others and change the inherent male dominated culture from the inside.

3- Be brave. Say yes, if somebody offers you a new interesting position and believes in you, even if you cover only 70 % or less of the Job description. You will learn it very fast.

4- Failure is part of the path to success. Even if you fail, you have learned so much that no one can take away from you and that you bring to all your future experiences. Opportunity can also come out of failure.

5- Mentorship and support for women. We need to support other women. Young women sometimes need a helping hand. Not every mistake has to be committed again. I am a mentor in a female network called Healthcare Frauen in Germany.

In this program, a successful business leader sits down for 2 hours a month for a year with a young woman who wants to "move up" and use her skills to improve the health system. Mentor and mentee discuss how to assert themselves in a predominantly male environment and structure, getting to know male rules of the game, practicing and mastering them in order to change structures internally.

We support them in using their femininity and female values and competences instead of hiding them.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

I would like to have breakfast with one of the leading women in European politics. For example Ursula von der Leyen the president of the European Commission or Christine Lagarde the president of the European central bank

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.

Wellness

