

Interview series.

Leaders making a difference, 2024

**International
Women's Day
edition**



Virginia Esly

**CEO Europe and Member of the Executive
Management Board of Messer**

With extensive and diverse operational business experience, including overseeing merger integration and business transformation, Virginia Esly shares her leadership style, passion for innovation and the importance of being customer focused to gain a competitive edge.



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How did your business career begin and what would you say has influenced your journey?

I started my professional career with a scholarship that combined a dual study in business administration and economics whilst working operationally at a company. This was such a fantastic opportunity to gain exposure to different departments from finance to operations, to sales and marketing. I was fortunate to have some incredibly good mentors on the journey. I had one boss whom you could call 'disruptive' – he would throw me in at the deep end, and you start to swim. It gave me a good 'I can do this' mindset, which was one of the most important principles for my future career. Additionally, I have always had a lot of interests in different areas of the business and was thankful for the empowering opportunities that I received. Whereas some colleagues planned their full career path, I have never done that, instead I believe that if you work on something you love, you are going to become proficient at your job, and combined with a bit of luck, recognition will follow. After moving from finance and controlling into sales and marketing, I took on increased responsibility working on a local, regional as well as global scale and then had the opportunity to move into merger integration. This was a big deal that may never have happened in my career again, and was an opportunity I could not turn down. In 2023, after 22 years at Linde, I felt ready for a new challenge and moved to Messer, a family-owned industrial gas specialist where I am responsible for the European business as a Member of the Executive Management Board, overseeing the full business scope, from production to sales and marketing, and all central business functions. I love my role – the passion of the people, the loyalty and the feeling of being part of a big family.

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You have clearly been inspired by leaders, both in past and present roles, how would you describe the impact of company culture and good leadership on operational excellence? How would you describe your leadership style?

Company culture and people engagement are really important. You can have the best processes, the best IT structure, be a technical expert but in the end, what really makes the difference is the company culture, the people – how you encourage and lead people. This, ultimately, makes the biggest difference in how you work with your customers – if your people are motivated, customers can feel this, connect with them and benefit from a robust customer relationship. This way, if there are hardships or challenges to navigate, you will have a resilient team spirit – led by leaders who are walking the walk, role model and inspire people – this makes the difference. Good leadership also gives the chance for people to improve business topics and innovate, they want to give back. I was inspired and taken on a journey by my mentors, and I want to do the same. It's about giving people a mixture of empowerment and responsibility. Empowerment is not about people doing what they want, it's about giving them the flexibility and room to grow, while setting clear targets and expectations at the same time. I will support my teams with what they need along the way, and we also agree on priorities and goals that we're jointly aiming for. I do not micro-manage, as I've never liked it in my personal career. For me, hiring for attitude is also much more important than just the skill set. How eager are they to learn and grow? How eager are they to get the job? These are important questions to consider.





Photo: Messer



In what capacity do you think technology and innovation can improve efficiencies and provide a competitive edge?

Innovation, technology, digitalisation – there are a lot of words going around on this topic. There is no doubt that digital tools can enable better processes, but for me in the end it's about being customer focused, finding ways to improve customer experience and being easy to deal with for our customers. It is of utmost importance that we constantly innovate, improve, and scale our successes. We need to be eager to learn and never stop learning. This is the differentiator for us as a company.



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You mentioned earlier the impact of a good company culture to help make businesses more resilient, but what impact do you think other areas, such as sustainability and safety have in helping to create operational excellence?

They are very important. Sometimes we think that operational excellence is only about excelling in operative business and processes, but we need a more holistic approach. Without a proper safety culture, you won't be excellent in day-to-day operations, won't deliver the best possible product and quality to your customers and won't have employees feeling safe in their day-to-day work. With a diverse team we innovate in our sustainable business. Having people with the same mindset, attitudes and thinking, prevents us seeing the topic from different angles, challenge the status quo and develop. Diversity for me is not just a gender topic, it's about having diverse opinions, characters and cultures and the ability to exchange and value the differences. For me sustainability and safety are the foundations for our licence to operate.



As a leader, what are your top three key drivers for creating business excellence in your industry?

For me, the top three drivers are customer focus, digitalisation, and people excellence. I know I've reiterated this quite a few times but being customer focused is really important. Often there are products that are not so different from our competitors, but our differentiator is the added value we are bringing to our customers. This is where we can make a difference. When I refer to digitalisation it's not so much the technical aspect, but more the continuous learning and continuous innovation which help us develop and grow, something I really love to foster in my organisation. Taking our teams on a journey, developing them, and inspiring them to continuously learn is an important aspect of a company culture. When looking at people excellence it's even broader. Development doesn't always have to be upwards; it may be sideways into a new field of expertise that will help people to expand their capabilities and business acumen, and will lead to a much broader profile, which then becomes the basis for a successful career path. Furthermore, it's about giving people opportunities, even if those opportunities don't always work out. Once I had someone in a role that wasn't working out and I had to figure out what was the reason behind it. I listened to the person and discovered the job was not matching their capabilities and interest. We discussed openly and found a great alternative in a different field, where the person really excelled. People excellence has many aspects that we need to take into account to make our people successful.

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