

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

OCTOBER 2020

LEADERS IN ACTION

Gabriele Renner and Sabine Stein
Co-Founders, Pervormance International



LEADING INNOVATION IN THE TEXTILE INDUSTRY

Sisters Gabriele Renner and Sabine Stein are the co-founders of pioneering clothing company pervormance international.

Through their company they have developed their E.COOLINE cooling clothing brand which cools the body by up to 12 degrees Celsius, saving significant CO2 emissions compared to using air-conditioning.

Gabriele started out by studying pharmaceutical sciences and founded a marketing and sales company in the sector. Sabine studied economics and sports, was a discus thrower, and went on to work in human resources.

Both remember the support they got from their parents and teachers – “Our father was our trainer when we were children,” says Sabine – but they also put their success down to personal motivation.

The two sisters began working together only when Gabriele’s colleagues asked Sabine to provide some material for a human resources campaign. Gabriele, the company CEO, had been on holiday, and when she returned to work she found her sister was now her employee.

Gabriele said: “I thought... that will not work because when we were children, we were fighting each other – you know, as two girls – and I thought, we are two very different people [and this will not work]. But really it was running perfectly because we are so different.”

Gabriele and Sabine soon realized that if they combined their different personalities, and their distinct outlooks on life they could start a company together.

Overcoming obstacles and finding a new path

Gabriele had founded her marketing and sales company with two male colleagues and one male investor. Within three years the company had 300 employees, but then Gabriele became pregnant with her first child.

She soon learned she could no longer maintain her role as CEO of her company while on maternity leave, nor could she be certain of being able to return to her job after the birth. In Germany at the time, the legal system did not provide maternity leave for CEOs.

“Women CEOs can be fired with no protection compared to mothers with regular jobs, which have maternity protection with paid time-off and job-protection post maternity leave in Germany,” she said.

Gabriele said there is movement to change this policy, but young women are still a minority in high ranking leadership positions within German companies. “The average CEO in Germany is 53 years old and male,” she said.

This major challenge became an opportunity for Gabriele and Sabine, who were both mid-way through their pregnancies. In 2004 they decided to create their own flexible work schedule by starting up a consulting company, using funds from the sale of Gabriele’s share of the pharmaceutical company.

“If you have your own company, you can decide what you want. You can decide your working hours, where and when you work. It’s not less work, but you can decide,” Gabriele said.

Leading the way with innovation technology in Germany

In 2010, Gabriele and Sabine founded pervormance international with the trademarked E.COOLINE apparel technology as its main product. The sisters combined their backgrounds in health, medicine, human resources, and sports to create a truly innovative technology.

When asked about how they funded their second company, Gabriele and Sabine said: “We financed it ourselves. We took the money from the consulting company...and financed everything ourselves.” The investments needed to start the company were minimal, mostly office supplies, and they already had their customers from the consulting business.

Gabriele said that, from previous experience with a male investor in her marketing and sales company, she had come to believe that investors in Germany were focused only on stereotypically male-dominated products and did not operate with a gender-lens. They did not want to deal with this again.

“We wanted to show that we could run a women’s business on our own. We do not need [investors],” Gabriele said.

Their first major challenge came when they founded a subsidiary company in the sports sector, only to face disaster when its two managers left abruptly. This left them with no choice but to close the subsidiary company, spend time and money on lawyers and then start once more in the sports industry.

The sisters took their challenges and lessons from past ventures to launch a unique new product, inspired by their combined backgrounds and supporting health and well-being.

“We wanted to have our own product, not just carry out services and consultancy [for others] because then it is never yours. With consulting you are always doing something for [another company],” Gabriele said.

E.COOLINE is the first of its kind in Germany. Once Gabriele and Sabine had the trademarked design, they moved step-by-step to different labour markets. First, they began including the cooling fabric into personal protective equipment in the medical industry, then they moved to making clothing for manual labourers and finally for athletes.

“Sabine was very good in sports. For us, sports was always something where you have to warm up, we never thought about the cooling down aspect. Then people [showed] us there were studies that if you cool down you save energy,” Gabriele said.

Gabriele and Sabine see their cooling product as a necessity with the rapidly changing climate, and as a sustainable alternative to carbon emitting air-conditioning systems.

Valuing sustainable practices and an inclusive supply chain

The company signed the UN Global Compact in 2012 and the Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) in 2013. Gabriele and Sabine insist that they are continually working to stay on track with both the Sustainable Development Goals and the WEPs to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment. They felt it was an obvious decision to sign the WEPs given they were already fulfilling most of the principles.

Gabriele said that when she was working in the pharmaceutical industry earlier in her career, she was almost always the only woman and it was hard feeling the negativity from male colleagues when she was successful. Now, as a woman CEO of her own company, Gabriele values intersectionality within her company and her supply chain.

Both Sabine and Gabriele said that, initially, they did not have a policy of 50/50 gender balance within the company, as 90 per cent of their employees are women. They continue to look towards the WEPs as a compass to remain on track as an inclusive company.

They also work with a woman running the textile company within their supply chain.

“I think this was a coincidence, but it works perfectly; it works on a personal relationship. I would not say that I would only work with a woman. I think that is the wrong way. I think a mixture [with gender-balance] is the best,” Gabriele said.

They aim to become a climate-neutral company, and all of their supply chain is in close proximity to Germany. Sabine said: “Some partners are in Slovenia and the United Kingdom. You can drive to every part [of our supply chain]... in four to five hours. So you do not have to use an aeroplane.”

With the COVID-19 pandemic, pervormance international lost contracts with major clients; a mobile company and an airline. They adapted; changing their strategy, searching for new target groups and shifting marketing and sales to areas least affected by the pandemic. Their cooling clothing is worn by medical personnel in protective suits, and the sisters also created the first cooling face mask.

Gabriele said, "It is more challenging to run a successful business as women. Especially [when you have] kids, because husbands normally do not have to ask [the family] if they can do their business trips and meetings. As a woman you have to organize somebody for the kids, you have to share time with them because they need their moms also. So it is even more challenging to build up a successful company as a woman than as a man."

Just as when they were younger, training for sports and starting their careers, Gabriele and Sabine have always relied on personal motivation and the strength of their partnership to overcome each challenge.

When asked what advice they would share with an up-and-coming entrepreneur Gabriele said: "If you do something you like and you think it is the right way, it is easier to cope with the struggle." Sabine agreed, saying:

"You have to love your work. If you love your work and keep in touch with yourself, you will have success."

Women's Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate leadership



Workplace HR



Employee well-being and safety



Education and training for women




Supplier diversity & marketing practices




Community engagement



Measurement and reporting

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