



## Leading Through Disruption

Powerful conversations with prominent leaders on navigating this era of relentless change



Gerlinde Layr-Gizycki

# Directors Are Role Models, Even In How They Interact With Each Other



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***Gerlinde Layr-Gizycki**, who serves on the boards of Bank Austria Real Invest, COVID 19 Finanzierungsagentur GmbH, and Belvedere National Art Gallery, shared her key leadership lessons with me in my latest "Leading Through Disruption" interview. Subscribe [here](#) to receive future interviews.*

**Lauterbach: What was your story behind your first assignment to a board?**

Layr-Gizycki: I applied for an MD position in an iconic museum in Austria. I worked in banking before and wanted to support this cultural landmark. Instead of getting my

executive role there, I got my first supervisory board mandate at the world-famous Belvedere Gallery in Vienna.

My for-profit business experience proved valuable for the organization, bringing new perspectives to problem-solving. I learned that there are significant similarities in functions between traditional corporate and cultural institutions, and diverse thinking on boards can be a real game changer.

**Lauterbach: What are the most significant enablers for successful boards?**

Layr-Gizycki: The Chair is crucial to ensure the information flow, create a setting to dig deep into details, and enable board members to thrive as a team. The commitment of MDs to inform the board is essential to create a culture focused on problem-solving.

**Lauterbach: What experience helped you to be an influential director?**

Layr-Gizycki: Working for a Big Four company, doing audits and taxes was a great education for learning how to ask the right questions and understand what to look at regarding financial figures and statements. Besides, this experience brought discipline to research, including looking for information on the Internet or talking to people within the network about business models and industrial trends.

**Lauterbach: How would you define the importance of networking for a corporate director?**

Layr-Gizycki: Directors and executives alike need sparring partners. Talking to peers from different companies and industries helps as you don't need to reinvent the wheel. There might be someone who has already mastered a specific challenge.

Networking is paramount for being successful in today's environment, where we deal with all kinds of uncertainties. I dedicated a lot of time to creating leadership networks for women, as we require greater diversity in Austria. That only happens over time and with dedicated efforts.

**Lauterbach: Can a board influence the culture of a business?**

Layr-Gizycki: Directors are role models, even in the way they interact with each other. There is a saying in Austria: the fish starts stinking from the top.

**Lauterbach: What is the hardest part of leadership in a boardroom?**

Layr-Gizycki: True board leaders are focused on all employees; they aren't just focused on the C-Suite. If you interact with people across all hierarchies, you will hear things that you most probably won't hear from your direct reports. These things might be critical to your organizational development.

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A leader must be courageous to accept critical voices and learn from them. Openness to diversity is challenging but crucial for progress. Creating programs for young leaders and elevating women into leadership positions has been challenging in Austria. Our duty is, however, to address difficult things and ideas. For example, bringing GenX into a board room might be significant. They understand their generation and possess fantastic communication skills we all can learn from.

**Lauterbach: What is different in leadership today comparing three years ago?**

Layr-Gizycki: Covid made us all pause and think. What do we want? How do we spend our time? Are our jobs significant? Besides, we all learned to collaborate more, which might have interesting implications for all roles. For the first time, we started looking for ways to differentiate between leadership and management functions. We can allow job-sharing in top positions, as an example. Attitude and self-motivation here are more important than formal education.

Finally, in the era of ChatGPT, leaders must be great at communication. A key differentiator between you and your competitor might be how you interact with people and how you treat them. In the end, no one wants to talk to a chatbot

about transformative and challenging tasks.

**Lauterbach: Can you teach leadership, or must you be born with it?**

Layr-Gizycki: To a certain extent, you can teach people leadership skills. But they need to love to lead. The same thing is true for networking, which facilitates excellent leadership. People are busy going after their businesses and having families. Finding time to connect and interact with peers and those outside your industry shouldn't feel like a burden but like something sparking your creativity.

**Lauterbach: What are some recurring topics when you mentor people?**

**Layr-Gizycki:** Balancing daily operations and taking time for strategic thinking is a big topic, especially when there is a lack of people, and it isn't easy to delegate tasks.

Automation and keeping great people satisfied and engaged are top of the agenda. Another area of mentoring is creating opportunities for executives to facilitate their leadership development and calibrating their roles to prepare them for what might come in three to five years.

**Lauterbach: Some of your executive roles combined running Finance and HR functions. What changed in HR function today comparing to when you first started?**

Layr-Gizycki: The HR function in companies has already changed a lot. Administrative tasks like payments must work without interruption in the background—people and leadership development surface, including how we work cross-silos and enable creativity.

**Lauterbach: What were the most important formative experiences when you started your carrier, and what do you do differently today compared to when you first started?**

**Layr-Gizycki:** 25 years ago, I was the first woman who moved from Austria to London while working for Arthur Andersen Austria. Four years later, I was part of a small group founding an Austrian branch of a well-known private bank. Ten years ago, I co-founded and chaired Austria's most influential network of female leaders and

entrepreneurs. Three hundred non-executive board meetings across various industries later, I understand that the secret sauce was to be open to novel situations and circumstances.

At the beginning of my professional career, I wanted to go the direct way every time. Today I know that there are many ways to achieve remarkable outcomes. Sometimes deviations contribute to greater efficacy as they enable the participation of people you want to bring with you.

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