

THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH NIKE LORENZ



ERIC SALMON
& PARTNERS

Introduction

Nike Lorenz, a prominent young German field hockey player, proudly represented her nation at the 2016 Summer Olympics. However, it was her subtle yet powerful statement at the Tokyo Olympics on July 25, 2020, that garnered international attention. While her teammates sported knee-high white socks with the German flag's colors, Lorenz added a rainbow-colored band to her attire, making a profound statement in support of LGBTQ+ rights. This seemingly innocuous act was the result of extensive deliberations and debates within the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the governing body of the Games, which eventually led to a revision of their contentious Rule 50. As a result, athletes like Lorenz were allowed limited forms of political expression during competition, and her rainbow-accented socks became a symbol of that change.

In addition to her achievements on the field, Nike Lorenz serves as an ambassador for two significant climate initiatives: the "Sports for Future" movement and the Sports4Trees campaign. Notably, she has emerged as one of Germany's leading climate activists within the realm of sports. The catalyst for her environmental activism was a shift in the international hockey calendar, which necessitated more international travel and subsequently increased carbon emissions. In response, Lorenz and her teammates took it upon themselves to initiate a reforestation project in South Africa with the ambitious goal of planting an entire forest.

She firmly believes that her status as a world-class athlete provides her with a unique platform to convey her message to a wider audience, further fueling her commitment to making a positive impact on climate change and environmental conservation.

Can you share some insights into your journey and the key factors that have contributed to your success?

I've always tried to intertwine my life with hockey. My early childhood was filled with sports and fun. My mom coached me, and I didn't dream of becoming a national hockey player back then. Things got more serious when I was around 14 or 15, and at 19, I left home and played in my first Olympics. What has fascinated me the most over the years as hockey evolved from a mere hobby and fun into something else is that I still find great joy and fun in it. Most of the time, I just have fun with it. But all the logistics, making sure everything works, being able to study and complete my Abitur (high school diploma) required a lot of organization on my part. Time management and organization were my best friends. They guided me through it all. And also, the fact that I always had at least two things on my agenda keeps driving me all the time. I pursued my Master's degree in England, and now I'm here in Cologne as a professional national player, working on the side, and being partially involved in activism. That's my full identity, and I draw a lot of strength from it. Passion and organization must always go hand in hand.

These are definitely the factors that personally drove me. However, I believe that many external factors played a crucial role in my success as well. For example, the support I received from my parents. The fact that they had the opportunity to drive me to Mannheim three to five times a week was a tremendous help. Their time and dedication were crucial. These were factors that contributed to the formula of success.

In general, I would say that I had a stable foundation. I always had friends outside of hockey. I pursued various hobbies away from the hockey field and always had my family's support. Additionally, I could keep myself occupied easily. I always had a place to return to. I could sit down and engage in activities like crafting, reading, or other hobbies for hours. I believe this was also of great significance, as it helped me maintain a sense of origin, even when the path was often challenging.

In sports, there's a lot of talk and evaluation about you, especially when you participate in the Olympics at the age of 19. The question of what's next often arises. But I always had this inner feeling that I knew where I came from, and that helped me overcome these uncertainties.

How do you define leadership, and what qualities do you believe are essential for effective leadership in any industry?

The question is complex. I definitely find the definition of leadership to be challenging. Initially, I tried to define it for myself as providing direction. For me, leadership means guiding a group in a particular direction. This can involve being actively present within the group, motivating from within, or it can mean charting an entirely new path and having others follow. Leadership, to me, also means being visible and present within the group, without necessarily being loud. People should know you're there, especially in challenging times, such as on the hockey field. Presence and involvement are crucial in such moments to improve the situation.

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Another important aspect of leadership for me is nurturing and ensuring that the group develops a certain dynamism to achieve its goals. As a leader, it's crucial to set an example and not only want to make others better but also improve oneself. It always starts with self-improvement.

To understand what makes a group better and how to achieve common goals, it's important to be well-connected, listen, observe, and reflect on both yourself and the group. Leadership can often seem lonely, but in my opinion, it should never be entirely isolated. You can't theoretically lead a group on your own because there are always people nearby who can provide feedback. It's important to engage with these individuals and ensure that leadership doesn't become isolated.

Can you share a specific challenge or setback you encountered in your career? How did you navigate through it, and what lessons did you learn that can be applicable to other leaders?

Certainly, I've faced some challenges. For instance, I've lost important games in my life, which was undoubtedly difficult and came with rough patches. It wasn't entirely unexpected, but I learned a lot during those times.

One of these challenges was the switch from one club to another. I made the decision spontaneously. The reason was how the club dealt with my then-coach, with whom I disagreed and wanted nothing to do with. This spontaneous decision was uncharacteristic for me because I usually like to plan and anticipate, especially regarding hockey decisions, studies, and other aspects. However, this decision brought a lot of pushback, and many people commented on it without knowing the full picture. This left me feeling quite insecure, and when I arrived at my new club, I was also uncertain.

Furthermore, in my new club, there was already a strong leader whom I personally respected. This was an unusual situation for me since I typically played in teams where I took on a leading role. This led to me trying to adapt and stay in the background in this new situation. It was emotionally challenging because many factors were beyond our control. As a result, two versions of myself collided, and it appeared inauthentic to outsiders. However, authenticity, in my opinion, is crucial for leadership. You should be flexible and responsive to the group's needs, but this flexibility should not compromise authenticity. In this situation, I tried to adapt too much while still being the loud and responsible person I naturally am. These two sides didn't align, and it took me a while

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to realize this and receive feedback from others.

An important insight into leadership for me was that one must be authentic, know their strengths and weaknesses, and be willing to express them regardless of others' opinions. Another challenge was around the time of the Tokyo Olympics when there was unrest within our team, especially regarding the coach. I found myself caught in the middle, trying to appease both the coach and the team. In doing so, I lost my own authenticity and values. I hoped to please everyone by solely reacting to what the group needed, but that didn't work. I had to bring my own leadership style, my

own opinions, and perspectives to be authentic in leading. It didn't work if I just conformed and wasn't myself.

How do you maintain resilience and drive during challenging times, and what strategies have helped you overcome obstacles?

Certainly, for me, these are definitely two different things: resilience and motivation. I think it has a lot to do with what I described earlier: self-awareness and reflection. To be resilient, I've learned that I need to do a lot of work with myself. I need to engage in discussions and reflect. It's important to strike a good balance between what others say and what I think about myself. Especially when feeling uncertain, one tends to lean towards one of these extremes. I believe balance is crucial. And even though I might wish for it to be different at times, I think resilience often means occasionally failing, getting up, and moving forward. Unfortunately, that's inevitable. Otherwise, maybe one hasn't tried hard enough. However, I draw a lot of strength from it. During training camps, I always take some time for myself, maybe write in my journal, or go for a walk. In any case, I engage in deep self-reflection and don't simply assume that there are always people around me to engage with.

As for motivation, that's a very important point for me. I try to view my year in phases. There are always highs and lows, and I consciously manage it that way. For me as an athlete, and I think this applies to other athletes as well, it's best if I consistently perform at a high level over many years. To achieve that and have peaks where my motivation and dedication are at the highest level, I allow myself periods where I do less and have lower expectations of myself. During these phases, I train less intensely and allow myself to take a step back. This enables me to get back into full swing when it matters.

Right now, I've had a summer with a packed schedule. I had the German Championship in May and the European Championship in August. That means I've been in full throttle mode every day for the last 6 months, pushing my limits. Now, I'm in a phase where I'm doing my job in the Bundesliga and trying to maintain my standards. I'm the second oldest player on the team at 26, and I have a certain role model function. As the only national team player, people pay attention to what I do. I try to maintain my standards, but I also accept that there are days when I might not be the

best in training or play worse. That's okay. I strive to do my best on the weekends but don't expect perfection every day. I think that's very important. I only understood this later on, also due to injuries and so on. Sometimes you have to release the gas pedal a bit to be able to step on it fully later on.

What initiatives or strategies do you implement to promote diversity and inclusion within your work?

My social environment is relatively predetermined in many aspects because hockey is the sport I engage in, which means I interact with people from similar backgrounds and privileges. I began to delve beyond hockey-related issues when I had a lot of exchanges with people from South Africa through an initiative. We discussed their perspectives on topics like climate change and environmental issues, for instance. When I launched the anti-racism campaign, I naturally started reading books about racism by Black authors. Typically, I've engaged in conversations with Black athletes who were interested. It's not my role to say, "Explain the world to me." Regarding the rainbow armband, I took the time to discuss it with my lesbian teammates before deciding to wear it, valuing their perspectives and insights.

I still need to understand who I am. I am a white, very privileged woman. That means the perspectives I represent are not particularly diverse. However, if I want to engage with diversity, it's the perspectives of other people around me that I need to embrace. I constantly try to respect that. If I wanted to get involved in these issues because I felt the need to use my privileges to contribute positively, I always reached out strongly to the people most affected by these issues. I asked for their perspective and how I could assist, rather than thinking I could solve the problem of racism or similar issues from my own perspective. This can only be achieved through dialogue, expanding networks, and engaging with people from various walks of life.

This definitely developed during my studies. It began with my interaction with climate and sustainability. It started simply with reading books on the subject and delving deeper into it. At 19, I moved out of my parents' home, so I quickly began making my own consumption decisions and noticing their impacts. Over the years, I increasingly engaged with topics like racism. It was always small building blocks that built upon each other. When I started delving into climate activism, I was asked if I wanted to join

“Sports for Future”, a German climate initiative. There, I met a female rower, who is very active in that field and who gave me some tips on who I could talk to when I wanted to start a campaign against racism in sports. Through that campaign, I became involved with “Athleten Deutschland” and joined the Anti-Racism Working Group. Things continued to evolve, and it became evident that there was a significant demand for people who wanted to engage with such topics beyond their privileges. That's why I'm very glad I started, and now I'm part of a network of people willing to help..

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As a successful leader, what advice would you give to aspiring young executives aiming to make a positive impact in their respective fields?

I believe that understanding, as I mentioned earlier, especially the understanding that being in a leadership role or being a leader is not always easy and sometimes it feels like you're alone or dealing with certain issues by yourself, is very important. It's easy to fall into this perspective, but one must not forget that in a leadership role, you cannot be alone. If you feel alone for too long, you can't effectively be a leader because you need a group to lead. This is an important realization that I need to continually reaffirm. You have to constantly remind yourself that you are not alone and consider different perspectives.

To be successful in a leadership role and to be a leadership personality, you also need to know quite a bit about yourself, recognize your strengths and weaknesses, and be able to reflect on yourself and listen. For me, it's important to emphasize that I never expect everything I do to be perfect or complete. I have no absolute demand for perfection because the world is too complex to always find the perfect solution. Nevertheless, I never expect something to be entirely or perfectly complete. This also

applies to how I deal with myself and others. A big part of my leadership style is to show that I'm human and that there are no perfect solutions. Emotions are a part of it, and I openly express my own emotions.

I believe this contributes to staying mentally healthy, which is very important for a leader. During the Olympic Games, I realized that I couldn't take on a leadership role if I wasn't mentally well. Often, leadership gives you the feeling that you have to be stronger than everyone else and flawless, but that doesn't lead to maintaining mental health. It's hard to stay strong, and I try to break that image. In my team, we have many team members who think similarly. We are a reflective and open group that allows for showing weaknesses. When team members see that even leaders make mistakes, we can still move forward as a group, and in my opinion, that's a good sign of effective leadership.

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Reflections

At the age of 26, she exhibits remarkable self-reflection and a strong awareness of herself and her impact on others. It's evident that she deeply engages with her thoughts. One could say she's sometimes a bit too much in her own head, but that doesn't make her any less impressive. She is highly present and conscious in her being and in the way she expresses herself in her environment. I find this astonishing, especially at her young age.

Although she may not have accumulated as much life experience yet and doesn't always find the perfect words to articulate her thoughts precisely, you can tell that she thinks as she speaks. Her way of speaking mirrors her thinking, indicating that she's still in the process of developing her communication skills. This is likely because her focus was on the hockey field and not necessarily on verbal communication. Therefore, self-reflection holds significant importance for her.

She is not at the end of her development, and that is a great thing. It's impressive to notice how she is perceived as "senior", relative to her peer group, and this comes from within, not from external expectations. In my opinion, this is the most impressive aspect of her personality, and I certainly wouldn't have said the same at her age. It's truly admirable.

Nike Lorenz was interviewed by Steffen Ehrke, Consultant at Eric Salmon & Partners, Germany.



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