

THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA FERRAZZI



Introduction

Claudia Ferrazzi's remarkable journey through the realms of culture, leadership, and diplomacy is a testament to her unique blend of talents and experiences. Born as an Italian citizen, she later acquired French citizenship, and her life's narrative unfolds as follows:

From her early professional foray into the Brussels office of Telecom Italia, Claudia embarked on a path that would lead her through some of the most prestigious consulting positions, including roles at industry giants like Cap Gemini and Boston Consulting Group.

Her journey took a significant turn when she entered the French administration, where she made vital contributions to the Ministry of Economy and Finance, with a focus on administrative and budgetary reform during 2006-2007 and subsequently, when she joined the General Inspectorate of Finance.

In 2011, Claudia assumed a pivotal role as Deputy Director General of the Louvre Museum, where she played a crucial part in shaping and executing the museum's scientific and cultural policies. Her responsibilities spanned operational management, financial oversight, human resources leadership, and strategic communications. Notably, she spearheaded the establishment of the Louvre's Lens branch and represented the institution on the global stage.

Claudia's journey continued as she moved to Rome, where she served as the Secretary-General of Villa Medici at the Académie de France à Rome, starting in 2013. In this role, she enacted reforms for art residencies and adeptly managed the institution's complex financial and human resources.

Her dedication to cultural heritage and diplomacy led to her becoming a member of the Superior Council of Cultural and Landscape Heritage in 2014. Simultaneously, she joined the Board of Directors of the Offices and assumed the prestigious position of vice president of the Governing Council of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO. In 2017, Claudia was entrusted by the city of Milan with the responsibility of directing and enhancing the city's promotion and influence, marking another remarkable chapter in her journey.

Following the French general elections, Claudia returned to France, where she served as a cultural and audiovisual advisor to president Macron from 2017 to 2019. In early 2020, Claudia Ferrazzi founded "Viarte – Art to Lead Differently," an initiative that sought to enrich the business world with the transformative power of art and culture.

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

I would describe my journey as having had a vision from a young age, one that was deeply rooted in Europe. My fascination with Europe was shaped by the fact that my grandparents lived through a time when war was a real possibility in Europe. This historical context made me ponder the importance of European dialogue and cooperation.

Early on, I started traveling because I felt a strong desire to explore and engage with the various programs available, such as Erasmus and Leonardo. I believed that European dialogue was key for my generation to move forward. I remember discussing with fellow students and colleagues, dreaming of a Europe where many countries would sit around the same table. Perhaps it was an ambitious dream, and we may have made some missteps along the way.

One thing that has become a passionate focus for me now is fostering dialogue between individuals from different countries. This personal connection and exchange of ideas have become profoundly important to me and have influenced many aspects of my journey.

In my quest to find the right educational and professional path, I came to France. I had no prior connection to France, but I was drawn to its well-regarded public service schools. As I immersed myself in the French public service, I gradually became deeply connected to the country, even though it was foreign to me in the beginning. It felt like home.

Around 20 years ago, the idea of being a public leader in the French administration without being French was virtually unheard of. Nonetheless, I decided to stay in France, and over time, it became my home.

At a certain point, I decided to focus on a specific area where I could make a meaningful impact. I chose culture because I believed it could help countries find common ground and collaborate effectively. I became the Vice General Administrator of the Louvre Museum, effectively the third-in-command, and gained my first taste of cultural administration.

Throughout my journey, one thing became clear to me: culture often feels isolated from everyday life. Therefore, I decided to take matters into my own hands and founded a startup that would integrate culture into daily life. This endeavor has been a significant part of my journey and reflects my commitment to making culture accessible and integral to our everyday experiences.

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

The word that holds immense significance for me in both leadership and my life is "reliable." I take great satisfaction in maintaining strong relationships with my team members throughout my various professional endeavours. They often describe me as reliable, and I believe this touches on a crucial aspect of female leadership.

Being reliable means not only being present but also being willing to delegate and accept the possibility of being replaceable. It's a unique experience that many of us,

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especially women, go through, such as when taking maternity leaves. Regardless of your position within an organization, even if you're at a place like the Élysée where major decisions are made, you must be prepared for the possibility that you won't be there the next day. This mindset extends to our personal lives as well; I always consider what would happen

to others if I were to have an accident within the next hour.

Therefore, I place great importance on being reliable and having the ability to delegate, ensuring that I can be replaced if, for any reason, whether personal or professional, I am unable to fulfill my responsibilities. This perspective might not align with the

traditional concept of leadership found in books, as it's a leadership style that acknowledges the potential for being absent at any moment and places a strong emphasis on preparedness for such situations.

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?

Well, that's quite a challenging question, but let me try to break it down. First, let's talk about an achievement, and then we can delve into something that didn't go as planned.

In terms of an achievement, I would point to my time at the Louvre Museum. We embarked on a project to establish a museum branch in a challenging area where people traditionally didn't frequent museums. Our aim was to create a different kind of Louvre, one tailored to this unique region in northern France. I took the initiative and became responsible for this project. It was crucial to me that it be a hands-on endeavour, so I would catch a train every Monday and personally oversee every aspect of the project.

The happy ending to this story is that the museum is now open and draws in 800,000 visitors annually in this challenging region of France. It's a significant achievement, and it represents the first time I took on both a leadership and operational role. What I learned from this experience is that when you truly believe in something, you must immerse yourself in it and be prepared to take on any role required. This could mean taking on tasks as small as fixing a light bulb or as significant as handling high-level meetings with the Ministry of Culture. It taught me that there are no rigid boundaries in a result-driven role. It demands a versatile approach, combining intellectual, collective, and sometimes individual thinking, while playing various roles within an organization.

This lesson was instrumental in what came next – founding my own company. When you start your own business, especially in the early stages, you must be willing to handle every aspect, from the nitty-gritty details to the big-picture vision. This experience demonstrated that when you are outcome-oriented, job boundaries can become fluid.

Now, let's shift to a challenging moment in my career. It was during a period when the President of the Republic had to halt nearly all activities due to widespread protests

and strikes in society. It was a tumultuous time, and the public policies we had in place seemed inadequate in understanding and addressing the emotional and irrational aspects of the people's grievances. The key lesson I took from this experience is that we had underestimated the emotional and irrational aspects of collective sentiment.

We had also failed to communicate that culture is, and always has been, a progressive force. However, we found ourselves perceived as elitist, disconnected from the general population, and at times, aligned with political ideologies that people found objectionable.

It was a challenging period, but it prompted us to make necessary changes. We learned that the cultural sector needed to be more in touch with the market and the realities of daily life. This realization led me to take a different path, to create a smaller, private institution, and to focus on bridging the gap between culture and people's everyday lives.

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

In 2020, when I decided to dedicate a year to research due to lockdowns, it became clear that our company couldn't immediately enter the market. So, we made the decision to fund a year of scientific research. We invited several teams to participate and provide their insights on what we were trying to build.

One notable team consisted of American sociologists who delved into the topic of fostering creativity. Over an 11-year period, they meticulously analysed major scientific breakthroughs of the 20th century, the kind that led to Nobel prizes or Field medals. They scrutinized these discoveries through a sociological lens, investigating the laboratories where they were made, their functioning, and the individuals involved. They also compared these successful labs to similar ones that had undergone research without funding and didn't yield results. Their extensive study covered

approximately 200 significant discoveries from the 20th century, and they aimed to establish correlations to understand how successful labs operated.

Their findings revealed two significant correlations. First, they discovered that all members of successful labs had a willingness to transcend disciplinary and geographical boundaries. This meant that they were open to changing their mindset and considering new perspectives, as they applied rules and insights from one field to another. The second correlation was even more intriguing and relevant to our context. Every researcher who joined a successful team had a second passion or another significant activity that consumed a considerable amount of their time, passion, investment, and motivation.

This insight challenged the conventional notion that the best person to solve a problem is the one who sticks to it doggedly. Instead, it suggested that individuals with a second set of rules and passions, who could think beyond the immediate problem, were often better equipped to find solutions.

Why do I bring up this research? It's because my approach to resilience is rooted in maintaining an alternative passion. For me, that is writing. When I encounter a problem, I pick up my pen and start writing about it. Writing provides me with an alternate activity, motivates me, and creates a mental break. It allows me to step aside from the problem at hand. It's worth noting that this second field of passion can be a more demanding activity. For example, I'm currently working on a writing school project, which may not appear directly linked to my primary work, but it serves as an excellent diversion. When I'm stuck on one project, I can switch to another, drawing from a different well of energy, motivation, and perspective. This enables me to return to the first project with a fresh outlook.

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

First and foremost, I firmly believe in the importance of non-verbal communication. While language is undeniably essential—I work with language, reading, writing, and

conversation—I also recognize that it can carry a lot of connotations and can sometimes be a restrictive way to engage in dialogue.

Consequently, I've made it a point to explore alternative forms of communication. Fortunately, I have a significant advantage in my work because I collaborate with artists, musicians, and visual arts professionals. For instance, I express gratitude to people by sending them a photo instead of simply saying "thank you." It's a way to convey appreciation without relying solely on words.

I believe that, to foster inclusivity, we must embrace diverse forms of communication. Often, we become overly reliant on verbal language, which can pose challenges when working with individuals from various nationalities, cultures, and educational backgrounds. Language can sometimes be a barrier to effective communication.

In my line of work, which primarily involves cross-border collaboration, I often find myself in unique situations. For example, right after this conversation with you, I'll be meeting with an artist at a car manufacturing facility. This setting creates a platform for dialogue between two individuals who may not typically have the opportunity to exchange ideas. Facilitating such interactions is, in my opinion, a means of promoting inclusivity. It allows people from diverse backgrounds, including those in major cities with high levels of education, to break out of their isolation and learn how to communicate effectively with others.

Reflecting on my past political experience, it became evident that we were on the wrong path because of our tendency to isolate ourselves within our natural and familiar environments. As a result, I've actively sought ways to communicate beyond my immediate and everyday surroundings, recognizing that inclusivity often requires venturing beyond our comfort zones and engaging with people from various walks of life.

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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'd like to provide some context from my perspective within the cultural sector, as it may help you better understand my viewpoint.

The cultural sector has been significantly influenced by the media landscape. There's an ongoing debate about TV series versus movies, with concerns raised about younger generations' ability to engage with deep and lengthy content. Some argue that quick communication and constant media switching have eroded attention spans, making it challenging for young people to delve into books or other extended forms of storytelling.

However, I believe this debate is somewhat misplaced. Instead, we should focus on rediscovering the art of storytelling and creating shared narratives that transcend different media platforms and generations.

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I firmly believe that leaders should be adept storytellers. The medium through which we convey stories matters less than the essence of the story itself. We need to make sense of our actions and decisions, especially for the benefit of younger leaders who may struggle to understand the rationale behind our choices. In meetings with executives, I've noticed a significant generational gap in comprehension and communication. It's ironic that despite having more communication tools at our disposal, we are dividing society and leadership into two distinct groups.

Therefore, my involvement in a writing school project is tied to this belief. I encourage leaders to contemplate how they can create and share stories with their teams. We should momentarily set aside the tools we use and focus on storytelling, as stories are not bound by tools. A compelling story, whether in a company context or in fiction like "Harry Potter," transcends the medium in which it's told.

So, the first point I'd like to emphasize is the importance of prioritizing storytelling over tools, fostering the creation of shared narratives.

Secondly, I believe we made a crucial error during our earlier years. My generation, for the first time in decision-making positions, sought to protect our private lives by erecting a metaphorical "Chinese wall" between our personal and professional domains. I understand the rationale behind this choice, but it's time to break down that wall. The fact remains that a person is a single entity, whether at work or at home, during travel, or in interactions with others.

Companies should recognize and care for the whole person, acknowledging that executives want to be seen as multidimensional individuals. In recent years, I've started to openly discuss my family and even involve my children in professional settings. This has helped me realize that my personal life is an integral part of who I am, and people are aware of it. Authentic leadership entails revealing one's true self and what one holds dear.

So, my second piece of advice is to embrace authenticity by being open about your entire self, both personally and professionally. It's a shift I've made over my 20-year career, recognizing that growth and change are part of life, and only those who refuse to evolve remain stagnant.

Reflections

Impressions from Claudia Ferrazzi's discussion were characterized by a sense of enjoyment and the discovery of a different perspective. Claudia emerged as a mature individual with a captivating blend of experiences and insights derived from various countries, all enveloped within her strong personality.

The dialogue presented an intriguing mix of business, culture, and politics, offering a fresh viewpoint that surprised and fascinated. Claudia's ability to articulate her thoughts and share her lessons learned was particularly noteworthy. Her wisdom was seen as insightful not only for the present generation but also for those in the future, encouraging them to listen, compare, and adapt.

Claudia's emphasis on the significance of art and culture in addressing everyday business challenges was also appreciated. It was acknowledged that these creative dimensions could effectively stimulate innovative solutions and provide alternative approaches to problem-solving.

Above all, Claudia Ferrazzi's discussion left an impression of high energy and unwavering conviction. Her openness and directness in communication made the conversation a genuine pleasure. Overall, Claudia's unique perspective was revealed, making it an enriching and engaging experience.

Claudia Ferrazzi was interviewed by Raoul Nacke, CEO and President of Eric Salmon & Partners.



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