

# **THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS**

## **A CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER SCHEYDT**



## **Introduction**

Dr. Jennifer Scheydt's professional journey has been marked by a remarkable commitment to innovation and sustainability in the construction and building materials industry.

Jennifer's academic journey saw her achieving a Ph.D. as a research associate at the Institute of Structural Engineering and Building Materials Technology at the University of Karlsruhe. Her passion for concrete became the driving force behind her research endeavours.

In April 2018, Jennifer took up a pivotal role at HeidelbergCement AG as the Head of the Engineering & Innovation department. Here, she oversaw the department's personnel and budget, leading a team in the development of customer-centric, innovative products and solutions. Her leadership prioritized sustainability and resource efficiency, reflecting her commitment to reducing the carbon footprint of construction materials. Under her guidance, the department achieved several groundbreaking innovations, including the printing of Germany's first concrete house, recognized with the German Innovation Award in 2021.

Jennifer's influence extended beyond her role at HeidelbergCement. In June 2021, she joined the board of the Institute for Construction and Environment (IBU), the world's largest consortium of building material manufacturers dedicated to promoting sustainable construction practices. Furthermore, she has become an expert in the field of economics at AiF e.V., where she promotes entrepreneurial innovation for the benefit of Germany's small and medium-sized businesses.

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

My educational journey began with an unconventional mix of subjects in school – English, math, and art. It might not have seemed like an obvious combination, but it marked the start of my exploration into various disciplines. As I contemplated my future, architecture briefly crossed my mind. The idea of combining my passion for design, mathematics, and creativity to create buildings was appealing. However, I soon realized that civil engineering was a better-suited path for me.

I embarked on my academic journey at a local university in Saarbrücken, Germany, where I pursued civil engineering. However, my fascination with building materials and their properties soon pushed me to explore further. This led me to the renowned Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, where I specialized in building materials technology. Among all the materials, concrete held a special place in my heart. The distinct aroma of fresh concrete on construction sites always drew me in, resonating deep within me.

As my studies continued, I began to delve deeper into the world of concrete, eventually deciding to pursue a Ph.D. My doctoral research focused on the durability of ultra-high-performance concrete, a field that allowed me to combine my passion for concrete with my academic pursuits.

After completing my Ph.D., I was eager to transition from academia to the industry. I found an exciting opportunity at HeidelbergCement, one of the world's leading construction material companies. Starting as a trainee, I quickly rose through the ranks, eventually leading a department. During my tenure, we undertook significant modernization efforts, embracing innovation and pioneering projects. One notable achievement was the construction of Germany's first 3D-printed house in collaboration with various partners.

However, my career took another exciting turn when I was presented with the opportunity to join BMI as the global head for R&D for concrete tiles. This new role allowed me to focus on innovation and international collaboration within the industry, a challenge I eagerly embraced. I also serve as a board member at the Institute for Construction and Environment ("IBU"). This role enables me to contribute my knowledge and expertise to further the industry's development and sustainability efforts.

In essence, my journey has been a continuous exploration of various facets of engineering, materials science, and construction. From my early school days to my current leadership role at BMI, I've found immense fulfillment in both academic research and industry innovation, contributing to the ever-evolving field of construction and building materials.

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

I believe it's crucial to lead with confidence, but in an authentic manner. It's not about saying, "I'm the boss here." Rather, I see confidence in someone who stands on a strong foundation of expertise and knowledge. This trust in one's own knowledge and abilities allows a leader to exude confidence.

In my view, this confidence is essential to steer the course, especially in challenging situations, similar to a captain on a ship. A captain needs the knowledge and assurance to navigate the ship safely through stormy waters. That's what I mean by confidence. It ensures that the ship, even when facing crosswinds or unexpected obstacles, like an iceberg, remains steady.

Furthermore, I believe confidence is closely connected to resilience. Resilience is an extremely important topic for me. I recently conducted a resilience workshop with my team. It's about maintaining composure, even when unexpected challenges arise. As a leader, I remain unruffled and maintain trust in my team and my own abilities.

Trust plays a crucial role, not only in my own work and abilities but also within the team. In my previous teams, I've always observed a high level of competence. It's important to communicate this trust within the team. My message is, "I know how competent you are. We can rely and count on each other."

Empathy is another important aspect. As a leader, it's crucial to put oneself in each team member's shoes. Everyone in the team brings their own competencies. Often, these potentials aren't fully tapped. As a leader, it's my responsibility to identify the talents in each team member and how to nurture them.

My aspiration as a leader is to ignite these potentials. I seek out the passions and strengths of each individual and provide them with the opportunity to flourish. This creates a dynamic within the team where each member realizes they are seen and supported. This fosters a motivating atmosphere where each person's performance is significantly enhanced.

**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?**

There was a real challenge that profoundly influenced my entire professional life. I mentioned my dissertation, which I pursued alongside my job at the university. This

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means I had a full-time position, and I spent over two years working on my dissertation in my spare time. It was truly demanding, to the extent that during this period, my family saw me only on Christmas Eve and perhaps on Easter Sunday. My vacation was completely invested in the dissertation.

At that time, my partner and I had wished for a child, but it did not happen. This was a personal challenge that I couldn't easily set aside. I didn't know how to deal with it. I used to think that everything I set my mind to would somehow work out. Now, however, I was facing a personal challenge where I wasn't sure how to proceed. I also had only fixed-term employment contracts, and I wasn't sure if my dissertation would be completed or if my contract would be extended. It was a difficult period, both professionally and privately.

Then, the book "How to Stop Worrying and Start Living" by Dale Carnegie fell into my hands, and changed my life. Although it doesn't directly address resilience, it covers many aspects of it. It helped me realize that it's often not sensible to worry excessively since most of our fears never materialize. For example, I pondered what would happen if I didn't complete my Ph.D. Then I thought about how I could handle it. This perspective helped me look at the situation more calmly.

I began to reach out to various contacts in the industry with whom I had worked during my industrial projects. I told them that I might be available if they were interested in collaborating. This created a sense of security and reduced my anxieties.

The book and these experiences helped me overcome fears and become more confident. I learned that solutions can always be found, even if things don't go as planned. This contributed to my confidence as a leader and strengthened my resilience. This period had a lasting impact on me, and everything that followed felt

much easier in comparison. I learned that sometimes it's necessary to deviate from predetermined paths to find the right way forward. And, by the way, my pregnancy also worked out in the end – my son is now 11 years old!

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

Okay, this is now a really important point because it's a continuous effort. In everyday life, it can be quite challenging, especially when you have a demanding job. The key is to ensure that despite all this, your

energy remains intact and your battery doesn't run empty. It's not enough to have read a book on resilience once; you need to keep working on it constantly.

This is closely tied to mindfulness. You need to be sensitive to moments when a lot of your energy is being drained. Often, this happens in a professional context, but it can also be connected to other things like family, especially for women.

So, you have various responsibilities that you need to handle, and you want to excel in all of them. There's a real danger that your energy reserves get depleted.

I always advise creating islands of relaxation in your daily routine. For instance, I recently went for stand-up paddling on the River Main during the summer, even though – or perhaps because – we were experiencing very challenging times in the business . The experience of paddling on the Main River at sunset with the Frankfurt skyline in the background really gave me power to cope with it.

It's essential to find these islands of recuperation that rejuvenate you. Everyone has their preferences - for some, it might be a walk in the woods, or something entirely different. The important thing is to consciously set aside time for it and say, "Now, I'm going to recharge my batteries." This is especially significant during challenging times when things get hectic.

**“You need to be sensitive to moments when a lot of your energy is being drained.”**

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

I mentioned earlier that I work internationally, and this strongly addresses diversity. Generally, it's an incredible enrichment to have all these different cultures contributing various aspects to our work. Inclusion is something we've recently implemented in a specific case. We reintegrated a young woman who came from an external background. She had suffered a severe workplace accident and was seeking a way to reintegrate into the workforce. We decided to support her explicitly. Our goal was to empower her, and I'm pleased to say that after a year of this reintegration, which she has now completed, she has regained her confidence, learned new skills, and can leave our organization with a sense of accomplishment. This is a very recent case we implemented in the context of inclusion. We are always open to such topics, however, regarding the topic of inclusion, we don't go out seeking to include disabled individuals just to showcase how inclusive we are. However, when a situation authentically arises, such as with the young woman who needed support to re-enter the workforce, we are more than willing to help because it benefits everyone involved and enriches us all.

I am the patron of the Women's Leadership Network for BMI in the DACH region, which I'm helping to establish. This network focuses on empowering women, which is particularly important for the construction industry, where we have too few women. We all know that a diverse team is essential to cover all possible perspectives.

For example, someone recently told me that cities were often planned with a male perspective, focused on getting from point A to point B quickly. Women, on the other hand, may take more indirect routes. It's interesting to note that city planning didn't always consider these differences because it was primarily dominated by men. So, when we empower women in the construction industry, I believe we all benefit from diverse viewpoints and approaches.

## **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 it's crucial to define for oneself in which area one can truly make an impact. It has always been this way for me. I know precisely what I want to achieve. Yes, I want

to contribute to transformations in the construction industry, to the modernization and innovation of this sector. I can do this because I know what I want to achieve.

Therefore, I think the most important thing is to explore within oneself: What am I passionate about? What makes my heart beat faster? Then, one should consider and actively seek opportunities in that area where their heart lies. It can vary greatly from person to person; it's highly individual. Becoming effective in that area is where one can achieve positive outcomes. To proactively drive positive change, it's crucial to have a clear understanding of what one stands for. I believe that this is something that, especially, women often don't do enough of – asking themselves, "What do I actually stand for?". If you were to ask the majority of people, what they stand for, they would probably struggle to provide a clear answer.

**“In a very male-dominated environment, the presence of women can offer different perspectives.”**



## Reflections

Jennifer is truly an exceptional individual within the construction industry, specifically in the realm of concrete and cement technology. What sets her apart is her unwavering passion and enthusiasm, which are like a breath of fresh air in an industry often perceived as dry and technical. Jennifer has an extraordinary ability to inject life and vibrancy into what is conventionally considered a mundane subject matter.

What's truly remarkable about Jennifer is her ability to radiate this passion and enthusiasm to those around her. She doesn't just inspire change through her actions; she creates a ripple effect of positivity and motivation. Her presence alone can uplift and empower her colleagues, making her an invaluable asset in any team or organization.

In an industry that can often be set in its ways, Jennifer brings a refreshing disruption. She doesn't just accept the status quo; she challenges it with a resounding "Can do" attitude. This determination to break barriers and push boundaries is truly admirable. Jennifer is a beacon of inspiration not only within her field but also in the broader context of leadership and innovation. She embodies the essence of transformational leadership, where her vision and energy inspire those around her to embrace change and strive for excellence.

In conclusion, Jennifer's contribution to the construction industry and her unwavering commitment to innovation and transformation make her a remarkable and highly admired figure. Her passion, enthusiasm, and leadership qualities are qualities that not only benefit her industry but also serve as an inspiration to anyone striving to make a positive impact in their field.

Jennifer Scheydt was interviewed by Steffen Ehrke, Consultant at Eric Salmon & Partners, Frankfurt.



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