

THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH NICOLA WINTER



Introduction

Nicola Winter is a remarkable German pilot and reserve astronaut, known for her exceptional contributions to both military aviation and space exploration. Her journey unfolds as a story of determination, resilience, and a relentless pursuit of excellence.

Distinguished as the second female combat pilot in the Bundeswehr, following Ulrike Fitzer, Winter piloted the Panavia Tornado and later became a flight instructor at the Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training in the USA. Her achievements reached new heights when she received the Flight Commander of the Year award in 2013 at the Sheppard Air Force Base.

In her pursuit of excellence, Winter transitioned to the Eurofighter in 2015, marking a significant step in her military career. Notably, in 2017, she became one of the few women in the German Air Force authorized to fly this advanced fighter jet. Her responsibilities included participating in Air Policing Baltikum and achieving the rank of Major at the Tactical Air Force Wing 31 "Boelcke" in Nörvenich.

However, Winter's journey extends beyond the realms of Earth's atmosphere. In 2017, she entered the selection process for "Die Astronautin," a privately funded initiative aiming to send the first German woman to the International Space Station. Despite being initially chosen as a finalist, Winter withdrew from the program in December 2017, citing a mismatch between her and the initiative. This mismatch is now known to be a simple lack of funding of the initiative.

Undeterred by this, Winter continued to pursue her passion for space. In recognition of her groundbreaking achievements, the Boston Consulting Group and WirtschaftsWoche named her the "Vordenkerin des Jahres" (Thought Leader of the Year) in 2017.

Fast forward to 2022, Nicola Winter achieved another milestone as she was introduced as a reserve astronaut of the European Astronaut Corps. This appointment marked her as one of twelve selected from the 2022 astronaut class. Alongside her space endeavours, Winter has contributed to the field of crisis and emergency management in space missions. She worked as a consultant at McKinsey & Company from 2018 to 2019 and currently serves as a project manager for Responsive Space Technology at the German Aerospace Center (DLR e. V.).

Winter's multidimensional career also encompasses her role as a keynote speaker on topics such as leadership, empowerment, and crisis management. As a lecturer at the Carl Remigius Medical School, she imparts her expertise in crisis and emergency management.

In a moment of diversity beyond her professional achievements, Nicola Winter showcased her knowledge and resilience in a special episode of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" in 2021, winning €125,000. She invested her winnings in her helicopter pilot training for rescue missions, a feat that is nearing completion

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

My journey has been marked by pivotal moments, and one of the most significant occurred around the age of 18. As a young aspiring pilot, my dream of joining Lufthansa was hindered by height restrictions. This challenge prompted me to reevaluate my path, leading me to the realization that the Bundeswehr also had a pilot program. The prospect of flying more advanced and diverse aircraft, coupled with the societal relevance of military service, became compelling reasons for my decision.

A noteworthy aspect of this period was overcoming the challenge of entering a field where I had no connections. Attending career events, reaching out to professionals, and submitting applications required considerable energy and determination. However, the positive feedback received from these endeavours made the effort worthwhile. Joining the Bundeswehr, I had the opportunity to pilot Tornado and Eurofighter jets and later contribute to the training of aspiring pilots.

Another defining moment occurred during my training in Texas, where the Hall of Fame showcased accomplished jet pilots, including astronauts. This exposure ignited my interest in space exploration and the prospect of becoming an astronaut myself.

The path to becoming an astronaut presented a new set of challenges. A prerequisite for consideration was a scientific degree significantly above average. This led me to embark on a ten-year educational journey, pursuing mechanical engineering for my bachelor's and aerospace technology for my master's, both through distance learning.

The process, although demanding, deepened my passion for space sciences, eventually driving me to pursue a doctorate.

The decision to study was not without its challenges, but the experience has been immensely rewarding. Now, as a candidate in astronaut selection, I reflect on the twists and turns of my unique journey with a profound sense of appreciation.

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

I don't find leadership difficult to define. In a team, it's the person who takes responsibility for both the team and its outcomes. There's no need for magic in this;

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you need some expertise in the subject matter. You don't have to be the smartest in the team, but having a solid understanding of the topic is crucial. Additionally, you need a sense for people – a good dose of empathy. Empathy here doesn't just mean compassion; it means being able to cleverly put yourself in others' shoes, motivating and supporting each individual to deliver their best performance.

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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?

I've faced numerous setbacks and challenges throughout my career. One particularly significant experience occurred early in my leadership journey at the age of 24. I was stationed at a prominent NATO flight school in Texas, serving as a flight instructor and Flight Commander. In this role, akin to being a class teacher, I held the responsibility for training 12 students and leading a team of six flight instructors. Despite being the

youngest and not the most experienced pilot, I found myself managing a diverse team that included a seasoned Dutch pilot in his mid-50s, who possessed far more experience than I did at the time.

Convincing someone with decades of experience to align with my approach, especially in a foreign setting like the United States, where adherence to training rules was crucial, presented a unique challenge. I faced resistance from this seasoned Dutch pilot who was set in his ways, having followed his own methods for the past 30 years. Instead of succumbing to stereotypes about military leadership, which often emphasize immediate dominance, I opted for a different approach.

I recognized the importance of acknowledging and leveraging the diverse competencies and skills within the team. I actively sought to transform potential adversaries into allies. For instance, with the older Dutch pilot, I approached him collaboratively, acknowledging his expertise and inviting him to contribute his insights. This involved navigating the delicate balance between his wealth of experience and the prescribed training rules.

The fascinating aspect of this experience was the need to break free from traditional military stereotypes. Instead of asserting dominance, I had to perceive each team member as an individual with unique abilities. It required creating alliances, seeking input, and ensuring that every team member felt heard and valued.

This inclusive approach paid off during challenging moments. When mistakes occurred, as they inevitably do in any professional setting, I took responsibility as the leader. Even when the top executive confronted me about a mistake, despite being significantly younger, I stood before my team, shielding an older, experienced colleague from blame. This showcased that age and experience were secondary; what truly mattered was the leader's commitment to standing by their team, taking responsibility, and ensuring a sense of security. In essence, when the team perceives that their leader supports them, irrespective of age or experience, a foundation of trust and security is established – a victory regardless of one's age.

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

Fundamentally, there are three key principles that guide me: gratitude, perspective, and a somewhat stoic mindset. Gratitude, in my view, is essential for resilience and perseverance and is directly connected to perspective.

When I talk about perspective, I mean focusing on what I already have. There are individuals in the company, three levels below the board in upper-middle management of a DAX corporation, who might consider not getting a promotion to be the end of the world. However, I have a warm, well-heated home with electricity and internet, a stocked refrigerator, hot water in my shower – these are all aspects of life that I should view as a privilege and be grateful for. Regardless of my background, status, or being a woman, I have the freedom to choose where and for whom I work, when I get married, and when I choose to move on. It's a privilege that we shouldn't take for granted, and building gratitude and perspective around these aspects helps put everything else in my professional context into perspective.

“Gratitude, in my view, is essential for resilience”

When it comes to more money, promotions, or a higher position, I can strive for these, but if they don't materialize, I can stay relaxed and consider alternative companies, positions, or approaches. It's not always about external factors; as a woman as well, I've faced challenges, but I've always taken it personally and didn't assign the “blame” to my gender, not as a disadvantage but as an opportunity to personally control and change my situation.

The third principle is adopting a somewhat stoic mindset, recognizing that not every fluctuation in life should dictate my overall well-being. Life has its ups and downs, but the key is ensuring that the overall trend, much like the stock market, is positive. I can appreciate the highs and endure the lows briefly, knowing that, in the grand scheme, life is generally okay and will continue to be.

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

When discussing diversity and inclusion, the main aspect I emphasize is empathy. It's crucial to genuinely understand why I want to engage in these efforts. Embarking on diversity and inclusion initiatives just because others tell me to, while not necessarily destined for failure, will likely not achieve maximum success. Finding intrinsic motivation is key.

I often struggle to comprehend why some companies don't see the inherent smartness in fostering diversity. Take the example of women in Germany—they wield significant economic influence, influencing family purchases, children's needs, automotive choices, and even vacation destinations. Therefore, it's wise business to consider the perspectives of diverse groups.

If I aim to create advertising, marketing, or develop products that resonate with women, it's only logical to consult women for their insights. Whether it's a financial product or any other, understanding customer expectations is vital. Similar to my engineering education, where product quality is not a goal in itself but a measure of meeting customer expectations, a diverse customer base necessitates engaging with diverse perspectives.

Empathy, in this context, isn't about sympathy but the ability to understand and relate to different situations. For instance, if I have young mothers as employees facing challenges due to inadequate childcare support, a high-pressure approach won't yield optimal results. Instead, I should focus on empowering them to deliver peak performance despite their challenging circumstances.

Being a nice person is not a prerequisite for this understanding; it's about recognizing that enabling my team, irrespective of their background or situation, to perform at their best ultimately maximizes overall gains. This principle applies universally, whether dealing with people of different races, religions, or abilities.

In essence, the approach is not about being nice; it's about smart business and acknowledging that diverse perspectives contribute to optimal team performance.

What advice would you give to aspiring young leaders aiming to make a positive impact in their respective fields?

Self-awareness is a key factor in becoming an effective leader. Paying close attention and honing a keen observational skill is crucial in every situation, even before taking on a leadership role. I observe not only those in leadership positions but also individuals who are not yet in leadership roles. I carefully assess situations, asking myself what has been said or done that makes me feel better about my job or boosts my overall well-being.

The best teachers are often poor leaders. I meticulously observe their actions, deciphering why a particular statement from a manager might leave me feeling frustrated or irritated. What exactly did they do or say that led to this reaction, and how can I avoid replicating those behaviors when in a leadership position? This level of self-awareness extends to keenly observing my own employees. Even in seemingly flat hierarchies, where open criticism might not be the norm, subtle signals abound.

“Paying close attention and honing a keen observational skill is crucial in every situation”

As a line manager with the authority to determine compensation and promotions, it's essential to recognize that employees won't always express their critiques openly. The illusion of 99% of “flat” hierarchies, as I see it, can be shattered. One person still employs the other, controls their salary and the career advancement – that's never flat. If my team chuckles at my jokes, it doesn't necessarily mean I'm a funny boss; I must remain aware of this. In meetings, if I present what I believe to be a fantastic idea and receive subtle signs of skepticism – a furrowed brow or a brief expression that is quickly masked – I cannot let my ego take the lead. Instead, I should inquire openly, “I sense some hesitation. Can you share your thoughts?” This creates a space for honest communication and allows my team to provide valuable, albeit subtle, feedback. Recognizing and embracing these subtle signals often serves as the most genuine form of feedback available.

Reflections

As one of the coveted few, a "One of One Hundred" female combat pilots, Winter not only commands the cockpit but also possesses an incredible positive composure that remains steadfast.

In the face of challenges, she radiates an unparalleled optimism, embracing the mindset that there are no difficulties, only challenges to conquer. Her distinct personality, marked by assertiveness and a willingness to show her edges, potentially contributing to her recipe for success, adds a layer of intrigue. Despite encountering adversity, she carries an air of lightness. She navigated these intense circumstances with a certain grace and positive composure, showcasing a remarkable blend of skill and resilience. Winter's capacity to handle the weight of live ammunition and the responsibility that comes with it, especially in the complex geopolitical landscape, further underscores her exceptional composure and resilience.

Moreover, Winter exudes a sense of humility, surprising us with her understated acknowledgment of being one of the three women among a hundred male pilots in the German Air Force. She refrains from emphasizing gender differences, instead opting for a more inclusive perspective. Winter doesn't claim entitlement based on her gender but rather aligns herself with the broader pilot community, acknowledging the challenges they collectively face.

This humility, coupled with her positive and composed demeanour, adds another layer of fascination to Winter's character. The absence of a gender-centric narrative and her ability to integrate seamlessly into the larger community showcase not only her exceptional skills as a pilot but also her inclusive and collaborative approach to her profession. Nicola Winter emerges not just as a groundbreaking female pilot but as a skilled professional who navigates challenges with grace, optimism, and a commendable sense of community.

Nicola Winter's unique journey reflects not only her groundbreaking accomplishments in aviation and space but also her commitment to leadership, continuous learning, and contributing to the advancement of space exploration and crisis management. Her story serves as an inspiration for aspiring aviators and space enthusiasts globally.

Nicola Winter was interviewed by Lutz Tilker, Consultant at Eric Salmon & Partners, Germany.

