THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH IRIS BRAUN

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Introduction

Iris Braun, a visionary entrepreneur and the Co-Founder and Chief Product Officer at share GmbH in Berlin, epitomizes the intersection of social entrepreneurship, business acumen, and sustainability. Born in 1988, Iris brings a wealth of experience and academic excellence to her role. Her professional journey includes serving as the Technical Lead at IFMR Lead and Harvard University in Chennai, India, where she conducted empirical research on financial development in emerging economies, with a particular emphasis on India. Prior to her foray into social entrepreneurship, Iris contributed her expertise as a consultant to The World Bank and the German Ministry of Economics.

Educationally, Iris holds a Master's in Public Administration/International Development from Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, complemented by an honours degree in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics from Oxford University. Her diverse academic background is a testament to her multifaceted approach to addressing global challenges.

At the helm of share GmbH since its inception in 2017, Iris has been instrumental in shaping the company's unique mission. Share's innovative model involves donating a product to someone in need for every share product sold, resulting in a significant global impact every three seconds. Iris has positioned share GmbH as a European benchmark for social entrepreneurship, emphasizing transparency and individual impact.

Iris Braun's expertise spans various domains, including social entrepreneurship, economic development in South Asia, international cooperation, and sustainability. Notably, share GmbH, under her leadership, made a mark in ecological sustainability by introducing the first 100% recycled mineral water bottle in Germany in 2018.

In essence, Iris Braun stands as a beacon of inspiration in the world of business and social impact, seamlessly integrating her passion for social entrepreneurship with a commitment to sustainable practices. Her journey underscores the transformative potential of businesses that prioritize social and environmental responsibility.

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

My path has not been straightforward, I would say, and it always reminds me of the well-known Steve Jobs quote that you can only connect the dots looking backward. It's true because, for me, figuring out how to create the most impact, how to make the best contribution, was about discovering different paths and contexts. After completing my studies, I initially worked in consulting. However, I realized there was still a missing piece of what I wanted to achieve, especially in terms of content. So, I ventured through various stages in the public sector, from the Ministry of Economics to small research think tanks in Rwanda and two years of research work in India. This journey eventually led me to what I am doing now – building a social enterprise based in Berlin. The underlying question has always been in what mode of operation I can contribute most effectively, and it took me a while to figure that out.

The fascinating aspect for me has always been the journey itself. It wasn't a clear goal for me, and then I'll just work towards it; I actually started relatively early in my youth. Through my then-boyfriend, who was a social worker, I came into contact with refugees, especially unaccompanied minors – children who came to Germany without parents. They had incredible stories to tell, and that experience influenced what I later studied and specialized in, focusing on developing countries and their path to a sustainable life.

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

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For me personally, when it comes to leadership, I've always had two fundamental principles. Firstly, I believe that leadership is about providing direction. This involves coordinating groups of people, finding common ground, and offering them a bit of guidance or

suggestions. One can always make a proposal; otherwise, it becomes a dictatorship, and that, I believe, has nothing to do with leadership. So, direction is crucial. Secondly, from my perspective, safety, particularly psychological safety, is equally important. One of the critical qualities, especially in psychological safety, is trust. Over the years, I've learned more and more to actively think about how to build trust and how one's actions or intentions can potentially destroy it. Trust is vital because, ultimately, without trust, nothing works. The more trust there is, the faster, more efficiently, and better one can reach their goals. In the end, it also makes the entire journey more enjoyable! One should probably never forget that people live not only to achieve a goal, not just to generate quarterly profits for a corporation or to achieve the highest possible turnover, perhaps in a startup context. People live because they want to enjoy the time they are in. Good leadership keeps this in mind, as direction and trust provide a frame but leave room for individual contribution, a vital source of personal fulfilment. Therefore, these two points, in my view, are crucial for effective leadership.

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?

Two challenges come to mind, and we, as a team and leadership, handled them differently. These experiences provided me with a perspective on how one should not react uniformly to every challenge. One instance was when our company secured a significant listing with a major retailer and a drugstore. It was a tremendous and hard-earned achievement, but the timeline they gave us was completely unrealistic. We simply did not have enough time to account for production lead times. For instance, a bottle we wanted to produce had a 40-week lead time, and we were just 15 weeks away from the launch date. Realizing this impossibility, we gathered, laid out the facts, and recognized this as a unique opportunity to make a difference. We rallied everyone involved, inspiring them to achieve the seemingly impossible, knowing that failure was the most likely outcome. Coming together, we created a surge of energy, explored creative solutions, persuaded partners, and embarked on this extraordinary journey. It turned out to be a challenge that led to success, demonstrating that there are moments of challenges where pushing through and persevering is possible, especially when it unleashes extraordinary forces.

In contrast, we faced a prolonged challenge within my company, repeatedly getting stuck on our brand design. We kept attempting to make it different, better, and perfect. I realized this was a failure because we invested so much time, resources, goodwill, and lost customers by persistently pushing forward without recognizing that it wasn't about just ploughing through. We were not aligned as a team, each pushing their version of the truth, unclear what the actual goal was. This lack of consensus drained energy, leading to disagreements and conflicts, essentially going in circles. Taking the courage to step back, we ultimately outsourced the process, gave up control and only then moved forward. It was a failure that cost us nearly two years. It's remarkable how much time and energy can be burned when one is not conscious of the motives behind their actions and whether they are unleashing the right energy for the challenge.

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

I approach this question from two different perspectives. Firstly, I often try, which may be easier in my role than in others, to shift perspectives. By this, I consciously do not mean the classic perspective of putting oneself in the customer's shoes. Here, I am talking about personal resilience, and it helps me to consider entirely different life perspectives. It's about realizing that what I am fighting for, no matter how important it may seem at the moment, is not the most crucial thing in the world. This is quite effective in my work, given our involvement with essential life situations, from development projects in Somalia to Colombia, from Asia to Berlin, where we collaborate with food banks and distribute food. It's relatively easy for us, if desired, to take a day to switch the point of view like this. For example, we always schedule a few days each year for every "Sharie" (Share employee) to spend on charitable activities. Personally, I have found that, whenever possible, taking a day off and reorienting myself helps gain a broader perspective, realizing that other people are dealing with much more significant issues. This brings a certain level of composure.

Secondly, there are the daily small struggles where taking a day off to work with food banks is not feasible. In these cases, I believe there are several relaxation techniques that can help get back on track. For me, I've incorporated regular deep breathing meditation as a routine, which helps quickly calm the nervous system. I think one can

experiment with various relaxation techniques, finding what suits them best. A small routine that brings a pause to the stress of everyday life, even if it's just for 10 minutes, is incredibly important and helps me maintain my composure. I use these techniques almost daily when things get stressful.

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

In this regard, we are fortunate at Share as our company mission attracts individuals for whom these issues are significant. Therefore, we can largely rely on movements within the group of our employees. One initiative that has emerged and that we have been supporting is the Diversiteam. It consists of volunteers who thoroughly examine the state of diversity in our company and propose concrete initiatives.

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The Diversiteam also serves as a point of contact for Share employees who wish to engage in discussions, may feel unsure about whom to approach regarding diversity topics, and it functions as an active group that consistently introduces positive initiatives. It has a designated place in our company calendar, where we regularly report on the state of diversity in the company, discuss potential goals, and provide education on why diversity is important and relevant topics.

Diversity is also about different personality and working styles. Many individuals face barriers to expressing themselves, so it is crucial to think about how to structure participation to make it as inclusive as possible. For instance, one might question whether an anonymous survey is the best method for addressing critical issues within the company or whether it is better to have team leaders initiate discussions within their trusted relationships.

This consciousness is fostered significantly through the approach to the feedback process. Asking how to seek feedback and the method through which it is obtained from the company should be done with awareness. It is essential to understand that it is easy to ask a question to get the desired answer, but more challenging to ask a question that allows for honest responses. Thus, it is crucial to consciously address the mechanisms involved.

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

One thing that I definitely did too late and neglected is the whole aspect of networking and building a network. I had a very technical academic background - I'm an economist and focused on statistics and econometrics. In comparison, I believed that it's crucial to do the right things technically, and the right outcomes would naturally follow. I thought that one would be rewarded for having technical expertise. However, I realized far too late that we never accomplish things alone, that the best ideas emerge within a group with diverse perspectives. Personally, I derive the most energy from exchanging ideas with others. While this may vary for each individual based on their personality type, I firmly believe in the importance of networking and collaboration.

Another crucial point is to invest more time in actively seeking help instead of trying to find the best solution alone. It works exceptionally well when you're passionate about a particular topic because that passion can be highly contagious. I've found that when you have that passion and enthusiasm, people are generally willing to share their insights, and by asking for help or opinions, you show appreciation for their expertise. It's almost like an unspoken pact of mutual support. Of course, not everyone will appreciate the changes you're trying to make, but that's expected. Real change often happens when a few people disagree, yet, overall, I've had overwhelmingly positive experiences. Success often comes when you challenge the status quo.

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For many people, especially women, there's a tendency to develop what I call the "hard work complex," thinking that one must work extremely hard and excel in their field without consciously taking the time and resources to build networks and seek help. Discovering this aspect of networking made a significant difference for me personally, providing a great deal of satisfaction and proving crucial for my professional development. If I had realized this in my early twenties rather than my early thirties, my life trajectory might have been different. Therefore, my recommendation is to be aware that success is not just about the facts but primarily about engaging with others, supporting collaboration, and actively seeking help when needed.

Reflections

In the perspective of an observer, Iris Braun has navigated a remarkable journey. Transitioning from a background in economics, she ventured into the realm of socio-economic issues abroad, ultimately founding Share - a company with a unique commitment to sustainability, product sales, and philanthropy. What sets her apart is the consistent integration of charitable initiatives throughout the year, surpassing the occasional seasonal charity events seen in the industry. Beyond the numbers associated with her economics background, Iris's extraordinary energy is evident, especially as she continues to lead despite the challenges of becoming a first-time parent this year. Her adept time management and candid acknowledgment of past mistakes highlight her thoughtful self-reflection. Notably, she emphasizes diversity not solely based on factors like skin colour, language, or religion but on the diversity of personalities. Iris actively fosters an inclusive environment within her company, employing various levels to consistently reflect on and embrace diversity. Her commitment extends beyond mere rhetoric, as evidenced by the inclusion of volunteer weeks, systematically planned with established companies, ensuring meaningful contributions to causes like the Tafeln. Iris's multifaceted personality, coupled with her boundless energy and ongoing personal development, exemplify a commendable woman excelling in balancing various aspects of life and work.

"Real change often happens when a few people disagree."

Iris Braun was interviewed by Astrid Jakubass, Senior Associate at Eric Salmon & Partners, Germany.

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