Barbara Frenkel's path to Porsche

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20/12/2021 It was never Barbara Frenkel's plan to work for one of the big carmakers. Porsche, however, appealed to her – not least because she has a soft spot for sports cars from Stuttgart. Her start in 2001 was no walk in the park – but now she is the first woman to sit on the company's Executive Board.

When Barbara Frenkel was appointed to the seven-member Executive Board of Porsche, climbing to the highest echelons of the company's management, she achieved something that no woman at the Stuttgart carmaker had accomplished before. After serving as head of European sales, Frenkel has been in charge of procurement since June. It's a role that is particularly important at Porsche because the in-house share of production has always been small, with 80 per cent of the value added coming from external partners. The company's annual purchasing volume is more than nine billion euros.

Despite its great importance, however, the board members responsible for procurement are seldom in the public spotlight. But since chips have been in very short supply throughout the automotive industry,

buyers have had to manage crises and cope with shortages. There are an average of 5,000 different variants of semiconductors in every car, explains the manager in her first interview after being promoted to the board. “We’ve actually come through the semiconductor crisis quite well so far,” she says.

Nevertheless, production has had to be curtailed at times, with some employees temporarily moving to shorter hours. Keeping production running occasionally requires some improvisation. The 58-year-old notes that on occasion, in consultation with the customer, a car is delivered with a mechanical steering-wheel adjustment facility, for example, and the electrical adjustment is retrofitted later at the dealer as soon as the components are available. Vehicles bound for the internal fleet have also been delivered with one key instead of two, because “every semiconductor counts,” according to Frenkel.

Office at the development centre in Weissach

The office of Porsche’s first female executive is not at the company’s headquarters in Zuffenhausen, but at the Weissach Development Centre. “Procurement and development work closely together when new projects are awarded. The short distances facilitate communication,” explains Frenkel, whose slightly trilling “r” gives away where she grew up. She hails from the city of Hof, in Germany’s Franconia region, and, after graduating from secondary school, studied chemistry in Bayreuth and rubber technology in Hanover. Her first employer was Helsa-Werke, not far from Bayreuth, in Bavaria. This medium-sized company describes itself as the “world market leader in components such as shoulder pads and interlinings for the international fashion industry”.

At the age of 27, Frenkel took on her first management position there, when there was a vacancy for an executive position at a subsidiary she had helped to establish. “I had not attended a leadership seminar or staff development programme. I saw the opportunities and jumped in at the deep end,” she says in retrospect. There were also some setbacks, of course, in which she learned “where my strengths and weaknesses lie”.

After 10 years at Helsa-Werke, she moved to a subsidiary of the French automotive supplier Valeo, in Bad Rodach, Franconia. A few years later, she moved to Alfdorf in Swabia to work for the US automotive supplier TRW Automotive. There too, Frenkel worked in the purchasing department. At TRW, the focus was on developing the European supplier network.

“We should meet”

Then one day a headhunter called, saying: “A major company in southern Germany is looking for a quality manager” and asked if she was interested. “I replied: ‘The only company I’m interested in is Porsche. If it’s not Porsche, there’s nothing to discuss’,” Frenkel recalls. The headhunter responded: “We should meet.”

The purchasing manager explains her very pointed answer with the fact that she didn't want to go to one of the big carmakers. "I enjoyed the high dynamics at the suppliers. As a supplier, you constantly have to overcome challenges, continuously evolve." In contrast, from the supplier's perspective she had viewed the large carmakers as rather sluggish.

A personal motive for the switch to Porsche

Porsche was smaller back then than it is today, she says. "I wanted to keep the dynamism that I knew from the supplier industry. Porsche is constantly reinventing itself and is never satisfied with what it has achieved so far. So I thought to myself: 'I could fit in quite well there'." Moreover, the brand was already highly respected and extremely sought-after. On top of that, there was a very personal motive for the switch. "I once took a ride in my brother's Porsche, a silver 993 Carrera 2 with an air-cooled engine. The driving dynamics were incredible." After that ride, she said to herself: "At some point in my life, I want to drive a car like that." Today, her company car is a red 911 Turbo.

Starting out as a quality manager at Porsche in 2001 wasn't exactly easy, however. The newcomer was charged with the task of moving Porsche into one of the top three slots. The aim was to prevent quality defects from occurring in the first place and eliminate the need for rework as far as possible.

It took a good deal of persuasion. "You can't impose anything on the team. People need to be convinced of new ideas. Then they will cooperate. There were some difficult moments," admits Frenkel. "But my motto is: giving up is not an option. I think in terms of opportunities and develop a new plan if something doesn't work right away." The effort eventually paid off. After a few years, Porsche was consistently in the top three.

Career tips from Barbara Frenkel

What tips does Barbara Frenkel have for women who want to make it to the top at a company like Porsche?

Commitment
"The most important thing is to show commitment and passion in your job. Do more than is expected."

Visibility
"Become visible. For example, participate in working groups that work on strategic topics and present the results to raise your profile in the company."

Team spirit
"Don't take yourself too seriously. The whole team effort is very important. Individuals can be strong. However, together we are unbeatable."

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Consumption data

911 Turbo (Predecessor model)

*Further information on the official fuel consumption and the official specific CO_2 emissions of new passenger cars can be found in the "Leitfaden über den Kraftstoffverbrauch, die CO_2-Emissionen und den Stromverbrauch neuer Personenkraftwagen" (Fuel Consumption, CO_2Emissions and Electricity Consumption Guide for New Passenger Cars), which is available free of charge at all sales outlets and from DAT (Deutsche Automobil Treuhand GmbH, Helmuth-Hirth-Str. 1, 73760 Ostfildern-Scharnhausen, www.dat.de).

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