

Leaders to Learn From

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“Growing up in Switzerland, by age 12 Katie Abouzahr thought she knew her path. ‘I imagined I would become a doctor and practice medicine.’ Although she continued on that path for the beginning of her career, she realized it wasn’t her passion in the long run. Now, the head of R&D operations for Janssen Research & Development, Katie wants others to know that their paths can change. “Careers are marathons, not sprints. You have more time than you think you do to explore your passions, take some risks, and course-correct as needed,’ she says. ‘Make the best choice you can with the most information you can gather, and then jump in and enjoy the ride!”



Her Pathway to a Fulfilling Career

Katie started her career as a medical doctor, practicing acute and internal medicine in the UK’s National Health Service in central London. (She’s a Member of the Royal College of Physicians in the UK) After several years of clinical practice, she wanted to get a broader understanding of the wider healthcare system and moved into management consulting at the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). There she spent over a decade advising healthcare clients on a range of strategic and operational issues.

In 2016 her family moved to the United States and she took nearly 2 years out from client service at BCG to run their gender-diversity research globally. “But I have always known that my future was in healthcare, and after a return to client work in 2018, I joined Janssen R&D in my current role at the start of 2019.”

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Challenges in Getting to Where You are Today?

“Balancing having a meaningful career with motherhood. I hold two conflicting aspirations within me at any one time: that I want to conquer the universe, and that I just want to go home and hold my daughters. I juggle these all the time—not just in the big decisions, like major career changes—but also in the everyday ones, like which flights to take or meetings to attend. That said, I am also deeply grateful for both my career and for motherhood. Each one has made me better at the other, even if life feels logistically insane at times.

The Qualities that Make a Great Leader

“There are many, but a lot of it comes down to treading the right balance—for example, between delegation and control, between consensus-building and decision-making. As a leader, you hopefully have enough experience to navigate the line between those as judiciously and thoughtfully as possible. My mental model for decision-making is (i) having the right case for change and evidence-base to support your choice; (ii) understanding what lies behind any barriers – usually there is a good reason or set of incentives as to why you are up against a challenge, and it’s important to find and unpick those; and (iii) create a story that you can align around as a team. As a leader, I want to motivate my team to be greater than the sum of its parts, and a shared story can go a long way towards achieving that. I also firmly believe that empowering people with the flexibility to balance their work with their life improves their motivation, engagement, and retention. The focus should be on outputs, not inputs—and technology can enable that in today’s workplace.

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5 Pieces of Advice for Future Leaders

- **“First:** Hold your own counsel. Nobody else will live with the consequences of your decisions except you. So by all means take advice, but in the end you need to own the choices that you make.”
- **“Second:** This too shall pass. When things are difficult – which at some point they invariably will be – remember that the overlap in the Venn diagram between growth and comfort is extremely small. So almost all of the most stressful times I have experienced have also been those during which I grew the most. And every one of them has eventually passed.”
- **“Third:** If you don’t ask, you won’t get. The worst that’s going to happen is someone’s going to say no?”
- **“Fourth:** Seek out the right people to have on your team. A good group of people who want to work with you and for you is like gold dust.”
- **“Finally:** Own your own branding. Branding is the story you tell about yourself, and ultimately it is also the story that other people will tell about you. So, I could tell you about endless trade-offs that have taken me out of clinical medicine in London and into pharma in Pennsylvania by way of a gender diversity role. Or, I could tell you about a series of amazing opportunities that have allowed me to work with some of the world’s best-known organizations to shape the future of healthcare and women in the workplace, and about how today, I feel like I’m having a bigger impact than I ever have.”