

# Billion-dollar business



and  
shared recipes

## Interview

— Yvonne Bettkober, Head of Organisational Development and Transformation  
Volkswagen

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**Yvonne Bettkober, Head of Organisational Development and Transformation at Volkswagen, is a born powerhouse. Proud African, mother of three and citizen of the world, she can look back at an impressive career. She cultivates an approachable style of leadership, is an advocate of openness and transparency in the workplace, and always has a time for her staff, whether they're sharing recipes or talking billion-dollar business. Yet she describes herself as shy and introverted. We wanted to know more.**

**Up to the end of March 2023 you were GM Switzerland and Austria at Amazon Web Services (AWS) in Zurich. Looking back, what are you most proud of?**

The human corporate culture that we built in short order. Bringing top-class talent together is one thing, but the real art is in creating a comfortable working atmosphere in which people respect and care for each other, so they can make a difference together. I'm proud of my legacy of establishing AWS successfully in Switzerland, and I'm now focused on the challenge that lies ahead.

**You built a great deal at AWS. Why move to Volkswagen?**

I worked in the tech industry for almost 20 years, mostly as a consultant to companies that wanted to use technology to become more competitive and innovative. If I learned one thing over the years it is that culture, structure, processes and technology are crucial to overcoming challenges successfully. In the end, however, success rests on human and organisational factors. That's why when I was invited to get involved in transforming the Volkswagen Group, I had to say yes.

**Were you interested in technology as a child?**

I've always been fascinated by how things work, but as a child I had little access to technology. To watch TV we had to go to our neighbour's house. In high school I majored in maths and physics, and then went on to study engineering, because in Africa that very much guarantees you a job. Fifteen years ago, when modern technology was increasingly becoming affordable for the general public, I realised what opportunities it opens up to us all.

**Are you thinking of a particular example?**

I'm impressed by the way technology pervades our everyday lives, and also how it shapes people's behaviour. In my home country, Cameroon, and on the African continent generally, there are a whole range of problems that they try to solve with humanitarian and financial assistance. I think that modern technology could become the decisive, underestimated factor. Digitalisation makes it useable by almost everyone, and it can improve many lives.

**What early leadership lesson left an impression on you?**

It was to understand that, as a strong leader, I am a role model and can inspire people with my own ambition. I learned that when I took the first major step in my career, becoming market director for a major tech group in Africa.

**What was another milestone in your career?**

I have three children, so taking on an international management role, with all of the travel that is involved, was a huge logistical challenge. Mind you, the experience has made me highly efficient and a master prioritiser!

**“If you're going to encourage openness, you need transparency.”**

Autonomy is important in a work setting because ...

... for me,  
it is the path  
to self-  
fulfilment.

### **Your everyday recipe for success?**

Openness is important. That's reflected in my 'high-frequency innovation' approach. It means more quality thanks to more quantity, and learning more from having the courage to try and fail. Together, speed, risk and decisiveness make for better quality innovation. In sum: fail better.

### **How do you put that into practice in a corporate setting?**

If you're going to encourage openness, you need transparency. Of course, that also makes you vulnerable, but I see it more as an advantage than as a weakness. In my experience you get more people on side if you admit that vulnerability. It makes you much more approachable than if you're always playing the perfect, all-knowing leader. Honesty is important to me.

### **How do you gain the trust of your team?**

By looking after them, giving them your time and your own trust, and involving them in major decisions. I run online 'surgeries' for staff around the globe, for example. We talk about everything, from recipes to children to billion-dollar business that's in the pipeline. I think the ability to listen is vastly underestimated.

### **How important is trust when you're working with partners?**

I've led teams in 20 countries, but there's one thing I will give the Swiss: you're world champions at

building personal business relationships. I notice that working with Ergon, too. Of course corporate culture and expectations are a good fit, but you can't do business together long term if you don't trust the people.

### **What's your advice for someone in their first management role?**

First of all, listen. Take time to speak with as many colleagues as you can and really listen to what they say. All of those little inputs give you a strong overall picture. Second, work with your team to develop a vision. Debate within the team, disagreement, sparring, all with a clear goal in mind, can be enlightening, especially over the long haul.

### **How do you define success?**

For me, success isn't some final state, or always doing everything right, but more the desire to improve every day.

### **Is there anything else we should know about you?**

When it comes down to it I'm actually shy and introverted. That's why I usually spend Friday evening to Saturday lunchtime alone, without husband or children. As a high-functioning introvert I need that time to recharge my batteries. Afterwards I can be 100 per cent mum, wife and manager again. My family knows and understands that. />

“For me, success isn't a result, but the desire to improve every day.”

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