

Interview

Women Making a Difference in Operations

Leaders In. 2022 Edition

Ulrika Björkholm

Factory Manager, Findus, Sweden

A collector of ideas and a love of learning has inspired Ulrika's progress as a leader in operations. As factory manager at Findus, she talks to dss+ about why developing the strengths of the people around her, focusing on values and listening to each other are vital components of leadership.





How has your background influenced your career, and what is the appeal of a role in operations?

The path to my current role has not been linear. There were a lot of twists and turns that have brought me to my current role in operations. To begin with, my grandparents had a farm in Sweden, so I was involved and interested in animals and the environment from an early age. This led me to study natural science, after which I worked as a veterinary assistant and then as a dog trainer for the Air Force. During this period, I learned a lot about leadership and how the use of psychology can help encourage the right actions. I then became interested in nutrition and, supported by the company I worked for at the time, became the first female to study meat technology in Sweden. My studies involved projects exploring how stress in animals impacted meat texture and quality. I then undertook roles in quality management, development, optimisation and legislation. I was also instrumental in starting up a new food factory using the latest technology, which led me to my current role at Findus. While my journey has not been direct, the knowledge I have gained from my diverse background and experiences are integral to my position.

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What are your views on the importance of establishing a good company culture, and how is it best achieved?

Good company culture is the bedrock that allows you to fulfil your role in the best possible way. To work effectively involves mutual respect where opinions are listened to and valued. Rather than focus on weaknesses, recognising individual and team strengths can be a more powerful way of achieving business goals. Also, identify broader strengths across the company and how you can utilise those strengths to improve operations further. If employees focus more on what they are good at or tasks they enjoy, they will be happier and more productive. Of course, companies have to have stated company values and policies to follow, but having a people-first approach creates a positive atmosphere that puts the spotlight on solutions rather than problems. This helps develop an environment of trust where good culture can develop naturally. Importantly, as the high scores in our annual employee surveys show, it's an approach that is proven to work and one I'm proud of from a personal and company perspective.



The adoption of new technology and innovation in industry is key. How is it best implemented?

While technology can be a great enabler, it will involve a different way of working for many. So firstly, any technological implementation has to be communicated to make employees feel comfortable with the changes being made and relevant training introduced. Good planning is essential, particularly as the pace of technology change is increasing. You can't stop production to train personnel in a factory setting, so you must find your moments. This could be when essential repairs are scheduled or when the production cycle is less busy. It's about taking these opportunities when they arise to deepen employee knowledge, not just on new technology but across other areas such as health and safety. Initiatives that ensure employees are confident in using equipment and staying safe also show that the company cares about their welfare.



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Achieving a more sustainable business model is now a priority. How is sustainability implemented in an operational setting, and what are the links between other business areas?

Implementing sustainable initiatives has not been difficult as these actions are entirely aligned with our company purpose. Employees want to make these changes and are fully supportive when they happen.

It's essential to develop and align with the world around us personally and at a company level. Focusing on sustainability has resulted in several initiatives, such as developing recyclable packaging, using alternative ingredients in our food, and using more renewable energy as just a few examples. Implementing sustainable initiatives has not been difficult as these actions are entirely aligned with our company purpose. Employees want to make these changes and are fully supportive when they happen. So rather than seeing it as an operational challenge, changes related to improving sustainability can help achieve a shared goal when communicated and planned correctly. We take a similar approach to safety, which is a critical risk in a factory environment. By interacting with employees to find out their concerns and knowledge gaps, we've improved safety levels. Equally, it's vital to close safety risk observations and communicate that to the workforce so they know that their concerns are taken seriously, and appropriate actions are taken. This approach feeds into developing a more sustainable business model and having the support from leadership teams has been invaluable.



We often talk about leadership as setting the tone from the top. But where does that knowledge come from, and how can it be developed?

As my career shows, the paths we take are hardly ever in a straight line. We can learn a lot from those sideways turns that take us in different educational or career directions. Those other experiences often help solve problems and see solutions in a fresh light. It's also important to be open to continual learning to enrich your knowledge and develop your skillsets, whether it's a course related or unrelated to your role. Whatever the source, the key is to listen to other points of view and learn; even one nugget of knowledge retained can add value at some point in the future and make the effort worthwhile. It's also about forging your own path, being true to your values and not trying to be something you are not. But also be humble, challenge your weaknesses and learn from your mistakes. We often overlook these more personal attributes of leadership, but simple acts such as smiling and saying hello can be a great icebreaker and set the tone for a good day at work for everyone. Having a more direct connection with people is an important element of leadership success.

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