

Inside Ikea's UK operations

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Somebody rings a hand bell every morning at 9am in Ikea's Wembley headquarters gathering staff for the daily briefing. It's a way of bringing everybody together, says UK country retail manager Gillian Drakeford.

Drakeford is clear about what leadership means to her: direction, clarity and building trust. "As the business evolves, you need different types of leadership," she says. "Men and women have different leadership traits. Perhaps those female traits such as nurturing and inclusiveness have become more important in today's world. That said, I do have male colleagues with those traits too."

Drakeford, who spent 11 years growing Ikea's business in China – including Beijing, the most popular store in the world – admits that she couldn't do her all-consuming job and raise three children, the youngest of whom is seven, without support. Her husband stays at home.

"But more importantly Ikea's Swedish culture promotes equality. It would be more difficult to do this job if there were two demanding careers," she says.

Drakeford says that some businesses do have glass ceilings that prevent women from getting the top jobs, but not in retail and especially not at Ikea. Half of Ikea's UK stores are run by women. And 50 per cent of country managers, the most senior territorial role, are female as well, as is half of Ikea's worldwide staff.

"It's important that we have female leaders in key positions and that we tell our stories. I'm a better leader because I have three kids," she says.

Drakeford took advantage of Ikea's whole-year-off maternity holiday policy before being promoted again when she returned. "A big piece of this job is leading by example," she says. "If I can show I can do a big job and can also have a family, it becomes something people can connect to.

"We truly believe that people are at their best when there's a balance between work and home. Another big part of my job is creating an environment where people feel safe [rather than worry about job security]."

Drakeford can be frustratingly on-message when it comes to Ikea's values. She is, though, full of energy, bubbly and chatty – you hear her laughter through thin Ikea walls.

"As leader I've learned that it's very important to provide direction and be clear about what's the direction. Why are we doing this? What's the purpose? People will exceed your expectations if you connect them to the picture and treat them as adults."

And Drakeford's vision is paying off: UK sales jumped more than 11 per cent to £1.4 billion in the last financial year, while internet sales were up nearly 27 per cent. Her stated aim is to double turnover and market share by 2020.

Drakeford is an Ikea lifer – she has worked for the retailer since 1987, when she ran a department of its inaugural Warrington store – and coming through the ranks means she sees things from a holistic perspective.

Drakeford says: "The real job for me is engaging with our 78,000 people who work in the UK, not just the top 50 people within senior management."

Ikea is considering opening smaller city centre stores, she reveals, as an increasing number of people live alone and do not own cars. The company has 18 stores in Britain and plans to open another four out-of-town sites in Reading, Greenwich, Exeter and Sheffield.

Drakeford says: "We need to move the offer closer to people. We need to be where the customer expects us to be, and our customers' lifestyles are changing."

Link: <http://business-reporter.co.uk/2015/03/10/culture-club-inside-ikeas-uk-operations/>