

**FORMULA FOR
LEADERSHIP:**

FIVE LEARNINGS FROM
THE FRONTLINE

Next Generation LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

SAVANNAH GROUP ESTABLISHED THE **NEXT GENERATION LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE (NGLI)** IN 2023, IN RESPONSE TO WHAT WE SAW AS THE **INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING DEMANDS** BEING PLACED ON LEADERS. THE NGLI IS A THINK TANK WHICH FACILITATES AND COMMISSIONS RESEARCH, EVENTS AND DEBATE ON **THE EVOLUTION OF LEADERSHIP** AND ITS ACQUISITION.

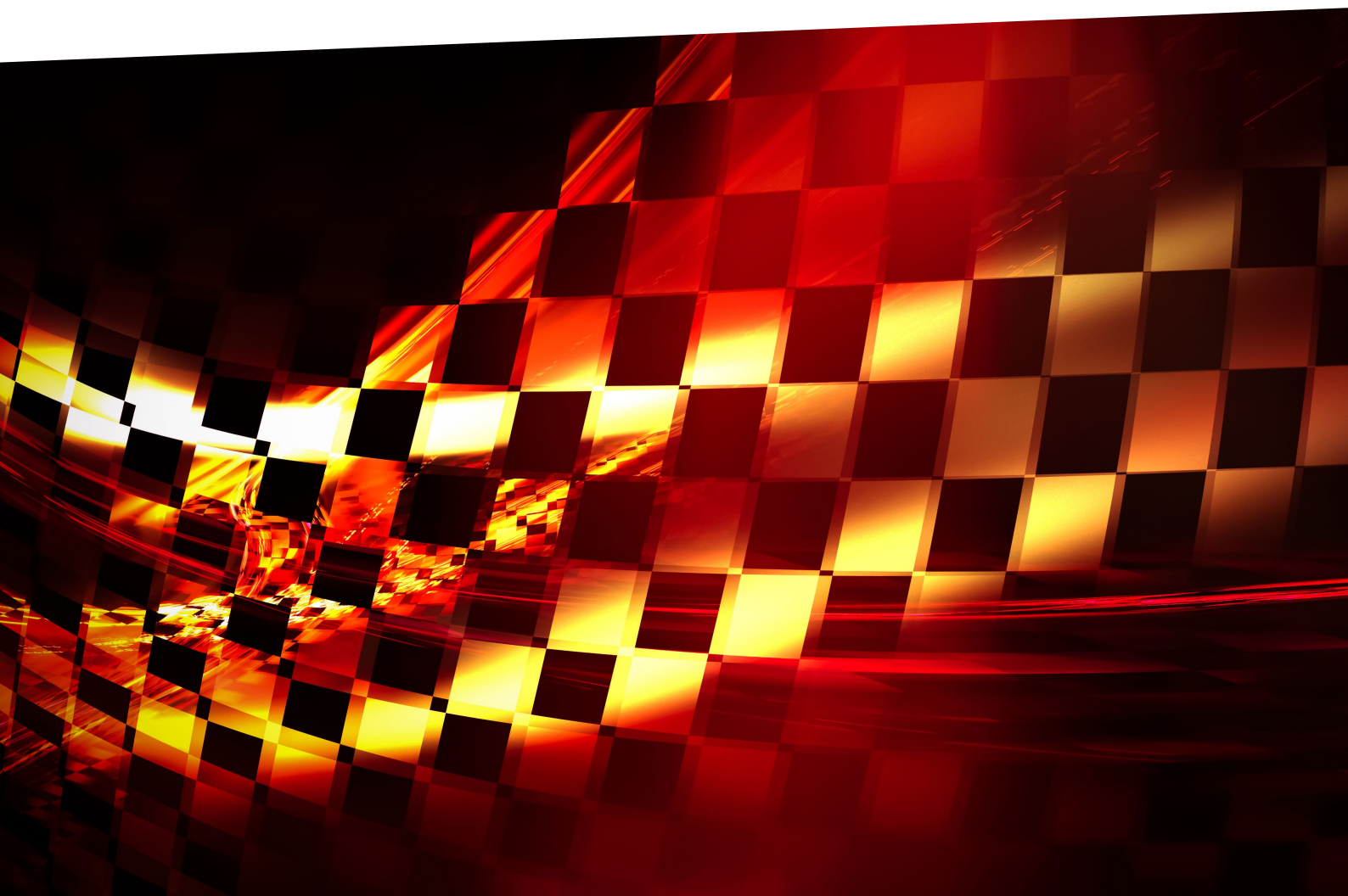
Formula 1 is an extremely high-pressure, high-performance industry. It is also a very male-dominated world. So, for lessons in leadership under stress and against the odds, who better to turn to than Claire Williams, Deputy Team Principal of the Williams team from 2013 to 2020.

Claire led the team through successful seasons as well as extremely challenging ones. She oversaw major changes to the organisation's structure and culture. She was awarded an OBE for her services to the industry in 2016.

We asked her to share some of the key insights she gained during her eventful and often turbulent time as leader in F1.



Claire Williams,
Former Deputy Team Principal,
Williams Formula One racing team





STOP ASKING PERMISSION

Leadership is a continuous learning curve. But the curve is much steeper at some points than at others. Claire became the de facto boss of the Williams team in 2013. While she knew the business and industry inside out, having worked her way up through the Williams organisation, this was her first experience in a senior leadership role. It was time to learn some fundamental lessons about leadership – and fast.

“One of my closest colleagues during that period was Mike O’Driscoll, who had previously enjoyed a long, successful career with Jaguar. He was initially in a non-exec role with us, but I was very conscious of the fact that I had some important gaps in my knowledge, so I asked him to take on the job of Group CEO.

“[I HAD TO] STEP UP AND ACCEPT THAT I BELONGED IN THE ROLE.”

“Mike taught me several valuable lessons about leadership. Perhaps the most important was to step up and accept that I belonged in the role. I think I was sometimes guilty of being too apologetic for being the boss. One day, Mike pulled me into his office and said, ‘For goodness’s sake, stop asking for permission.’

“It’s a piece of advice that has stuck with me ever since. I was brought up to be very deferential and respectful to other people. It’s just the way I am. But there are times – in fact most of the time when you’re running a Formula 1 team – when you simply cannot afford to be like that. You must be seen as strong and decisive.”



BE RELENTLESS IN YOUR PURSUIT OF SUCCESS

Claire grew up as part of the Williams family, literally and metaphorically. In her formative years, this meant being surrounded by a group of powerful and influential F1 personalities, popularly known as The Piranha Club. It included well-known figures such as Bernie Ecclestone, Ron Dennis and, of course, Claire's father Frank. Claire learned many lessons about leadership from the Piranha Club 'by osmosis' (in her words). The key takeaway: passion is everything.

"Watching people like my Dad and Ron as I grew up taught me that if you really want something in life or in business, then you've got to roll your sleeves up and work for it. There are no excuses. Success does not come easy and there will be many failures along the way, so you have to be absolutely relentless in your pursuit of it.

"People would sometimes say to my mum that we were lucky that Formula 1 had given us such a wonderful life. My mum would get very cross. 'That's not luck,' she would say. 'That's because Frank works 24 hours a day and doesn't understand why people take Christmas off.'"



IN TIMES OF ADVERSITY, CELEBRATE THE LITTLE WINS

In her first four years as Deputy Team Principal, Claire helped revive Williams' fortunes, securing two third place and two fifth place finishes in the constructors' championship between 2014 AND 2017. In the years following, however, the team's performance dipped, heaping increased pressure on Claire and her colleagues. As a leader, how do you maintain focus, belief and morale when things are not going to plan?

"THERE ARE ALWAYS LOTS OF SMALL VICTORIES YOU CAN POINT TO AND BUILD ON."


"My advice is to celebrate success wherever you can find it. Only one team can win each week in Formula 1. The other nine have to learn from their mistakes and find ways to turn their failure into a positive. Let's just say that towards the end of my tenure we had a lot of learning to do.

"While we may not have been winning any races in those years, there are always lots of small victories you can point to and build on. For example, when we did the fastest pitstop in a race, we celebrated that achievement and used it as impetus to drive performance improvements in other areas of the team.

"The worst moment came at the start of the 2019 championship when we failed to get our car to testing on time. In the aftermath, we conducted a three- to four-month review, interviewing everyone who had been involved in the process and examining every detail to identify and learn from what went wrong. The following season, we got our car to testing three days early – and, again, we celebrated that achievement as if it was a win.

"We also made a conscious effort to have fun, which sounds ridiculous but proved surprisingly effective. I remember one weekend we had a party in a roof bar. The rest of the paddock couldn't understand why we were doing it, given that we were losing. But the next day, it was a wet race with lots of pit stops, and we were the fastest team for seven out of eight of them. It was a lesson in the importance of maintaining a strong team culture – and, in times of adversity, doing it by any means possible."





“AS A LEADER YOU NEED TO
BE **CONSTANTLY TESTING THE**
HEARTBEAT OF YOUR CULTURE.”

GET INTO THE WEEDS OF YOUR ORGANISATION

A Formula 1 team is many times larger and more complex than the people you see on TV. When Claire was in charge at Williams, there were around 1,000 employees working at the company’s 60-acre site in Oxfordshire. This included not only the race team but also manufacturing, design and aerodynamics as well as an advanced engineering business. How did she approach leading such a large and diverse organisation?

“Fastidiousness is a quality I learned from Ron Dennis [former CEO of McLaren]. He was always across every detail of his team – and that’s what I always aimed to do. It required a lot of mental gymnastics, as I was continually switching from challenge to challenge and from department to department.

“I also made it my mission to get in front of as many as people as possible, especially when things were not going well, so I could clearly communicate what we were doing and how we planned to change things for the better. In times of adversity, it is tempting as a leader to hide away in your office and bury your head in the sand. But personally, I think it is more important than ever for leaders to be present and seen.

“You need to get out there and into the weeds of your organisation, talking to as many people as you can. Once a fortnight, I would ask my PA to pluck five random people out of the team and invite them to have lunch with me. I would sit down with them in the canteen for an hour while they filled me in on the good, the bad and the ugly. As a leader, you need to be constantly testing the heartbeat of your culture. You simply cannot do that sitting at your desk.”



CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR DIVERSITY TO GROW

Claire is one of only two women to have ever led a Formula 1 team. Unsurprisingly, she has been a strong advocate for greater diversity and inclusion within the sport, both during her time as Deputy Team Principal and since. What advice does she have for leaders on overcoming inertia on this issue and initiating overdue change?

“Formula 1 has long been dominated by men. But the world has moved on, and industries like racing need to respond accordingly. During my time at Williams, we put changes in place that had a very positive impact on the organisation. The strategy was to focus initially on gender diversity, and then use that as a model that we could apply to other areas.

**“IF THAT’S POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION,
I MAKE NO EXCUSES FOR IT.”**

“We improved the culture for women in the business by creating a Women at Williams network, by educating employees on what it’s like to be a woman in the organisation, and by making adjustments to a workplace that had, for historical reasons, been designed exclusively for men. We also brought in a policy that anyone who was hiring had to have at least one woman on their interview shortlist. And if that’s positive discrimination, I make no excuses for it. The lack of women was a serious problem that called for a radical response. When I took over, only 9% of our workforce was female. When I left, it was 19%.

“Another area we looked at was disability. The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) had been our nominated charity for some time, but I always felt we could be doing a lot more. So, we worked with the SIA to create a couple of work placements that would enable people with spinal cord injuries to apply to work in any area of our business that matched their skillset. The aim was to help people overcome the loss of confidence that inevitably comes with injury, and to make it easier for them to navigate their way back into permanent work.

“The first people we brought in were so successful, we offered them full-time jobs at the end of their work placements.

“And you know what? I think employing people with disabilities is good for everyone else in your organisation as well. Most people do not get to interact with wheelchair users in their day-to-day lives. But we did – and it helped all of us at Williams to become more understanding of other people, and more considerate and empathetic in our dealings with each other.”





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