



Biotech Daily's CEO interview

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GlaxoSmithKline's Deborah Waterhouse: No Ordinary Boss

Directed to Portable 13 on the outskirts of the Glaxosmithkline plant in Boronia, on the outskirts of Melbourne, I'm puzzled by the location of the boss's office.

I soon discover that GSK's vice president and general manager for Australia and New Zealand, Deborah Waterhouse, is no ordinary boss.

Ms Waterhouse made a conscious decision to leave the corporate office where ordinary workers fear to tread and created her own space among the working staff so she could be part of the Glaxosmithkline process and hear directly about complaints, innovations and bright ideas.

"In the main block, nobody came spontaneously to see me. Here, I've turned my office into a meeting room," Ms Waterhouse said.

Deborah Waterhouse – no known relation to the Australian horse racing family – must have the best 'girl who made good' story I've heard.

The daughter of a Birmingham butcher, she grew up on the Chelmsley Wood council estate and went to school in the 1970s in the seriously working class Handsworth where she says she developed her "passion for equality".

Escaping from her hometown, as many English teenagers do, she enrolled in an Arts degree at Liverpool University and majored in English and Economic History.

Her first job was in the boys' world of the UK car industry working in marketing at Land Rover. She says it made her tougher.

A postgraduate degree in marketing at London University was completed just in time to be headhunted by Glaxo Wellcome in 1996, where Deborah was a junior in the marketing team with the title "respiratory brand manager marketing".

But she quickly rose to area manager responsible for South West England based in the picturesque Roman town of Bath, where she met her husband to be, Dr Lloyd Bender, a South African paediatric eye surgeon in 1998.

Deborah says that she realized that research and development was the other wing to sales and marketing for a major pharmaceutical company and began studying all the science she missed in secondary school and university.

“If you want to be successful in a pharmaceutical company you need to understand the sales force and the other life blood is research and development. Big pharma is a very complicated machine.”

“I read and learnt and learnt,” she says, effectively teaching herself a basic science degree.

One of the many lessons along the way was the need to integrate and democratize bureaucracies.

Deborah has led the planned move from outer Boronia, where the land was very cheap when Glaxo first bought it, to inner city Abbotsford.

She says it will be an open plan office and all staff, herself included, will have the same size desks and the same equipment.

“It will be a non-hierarchical structure, more organic and cross-functional to share and spread thinking and ideas.”

“Some of the most acute observations come from unexpected sources,” she says.

“I’m trying to build something that is big pharma, but there are many ways to partner with people, not like an army, but flexible, a more fluid approach to running a company – a real cross-functional connectivity in a clear framework.”

Ms Waterhouse underlines that she is not interested in chaos, but a definite structure that allows all parts of the process to be in constant communication and be fertile ground for ideas.

Her progressive approach sounds radical, except that it once was standard text book organizational behavior, thrown out by the corporate macho management of the 1980s.

Ms Waterhouse says the company’s collaborations are with scientists, biotechnology companies, universities and institutions and she believes that her approach will bring Glaxosmithkline the greatest long term rewards.

She was chosen to head the Australia and New Zealand operation following her period as the head of HIV for Europe and later as the head of human resources for Europe.

She worked with one of the then candidates for the role of Glaxosmithkline Plc’s chief executive officer, Andrew Witty, developing a 10-year strategy to evolve the global organizational model.

Mr Witty was successful and Deborah says his patronage was helpful in her August 2008 appointment as the head of the company's Australian and New Zealand operations, reporting to the head of Glaxosmithkline Asia Pacific, Christophe Weber.

Aware that there are still career opportunities ahead, Deborah Waterhouse says she loves Australia and is here for the medium term, well beyond the move to the Abbotsford headquarters planned for July this year.

Her children Georgia and James are at school in Brighton and husband has finally been given approval to practice medicine working at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital and the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital.

Deborah Waterhouse has come an awfully long way from Chelmsley Wood.

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