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LEADERSHIP THOUGHTS

Diversity Champion: Abigail Storms, Senior Vice President Global, Sweeteners & Fibers at Tate & Lyle



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HC Group's Diversity Champion series profiles diverse individuals in the commodities sector to voice their personal and professional journey. In our latest interview, we speak to Abigail Storms, Senior Vice President, Global Sweeteners & Fibers at Tate & Lyle, to learn more about her career path and her advice for others working in the global commodity industry.

With more than 20 years of experience in blue chip marketing, sales, and innovation, across industries including homecare, personal care, healthcare, and food, our Diversity Champion Abigail Storms was recently promoted to Senior Vice President, Global Sweeteners and Fibers at Tate & Lyle. Within this role, Storms continues her work on a global and regional level at a company that was founded over 160 years ago.

At Tate & Lyle, Storms is faced with the challenge of responding to changing consumer needs and retaining the company's competitive edge, while ensuring her team feels seen, heard, and valued. We speak to Storms to understand how she generates better ideas and deeper insights by utilising a diverse team, and how she not only attracts but also retains diverse talent.

HC Insider: Please tell us about your career leading up to Tate & Lyle.

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brought to life how diverse beauty is. I remember we flew one of the models, a 90-year-old woman, to New York, for the press launch and she was so beautiful. She really turned industry stereotypes on their head. We took this work further by speaking in schools and talking to young girls about the unrealistic images we were seeing from some beauty brands. From there, I moved back to Johnson & Johnson and launched the Splenda brand in the UK. Again, I was helping to make a difference in people's lives, this time with for people with diabetes who could still enjoy something sweet with the help of Splenda, a zero-calorie sweetener. After this, I moved to lead the oral care franchise at Johnson & Johnson, growing the Listerine brand in Europe. I was then recruited by Tate & Lyle to work in the newly formed global marketing team, focused on sweeteners. I have spent the past 10 years in the sweetener team, with expanded responsibilities, and most recently added fibre to my remit.

“Seeing something that you’ve worked on from the idea stage all the way through to the finished product is still so satisfying. It’s important to share that with the organisation and celebrate the people who helped.”

HC Insider: What have been some of your career highlights?

AS: Career highlights for me include working together with my team and overachieving when previously you would have felt that the goal was so high, you’d never reach it. I get satisfaction from achieving that goal with my team and recognising that the success isn’t a result of just one person’s work. Success is a result of teams working together. Seeing something that you’ve worked on from the idea stage all the way through to the finished product is still so satisfying. It’s important to share that with the organisation and celebrate the people who helped. This mindset helps me attract and retain talent, whose unique differences generate better ideas and deeper insights to solve the challenges we face.

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Lyle about the ingredient industry, but I think it's important to be aware of gaining the right balance when it comes to building your knowledge in a new role. You need to be able to make informed decisions, but you don't want to get sucked into trying to understand everything. I'm not a scientist and I'm not an engineer. I tackled this challenge by connecting with as many people as possible in all parts of the business to be a team player. I focused on learning from the people who had customer-facing roles and I spoke with our research and development scientists, so I had a complete end-to-end view. It's important to ask questions.

“I'm driven to find a solution to any problem placed in front of me—which requires me to be both determined and adaptable.”

HC Insider: During your career, what has been critical to your success?

AS: I love to learn, and I would say that has been critical to my success. Also, being humble and never approaching a situation like you have all the answers is important. I'm also not afraid to ask for help. I'm driven to find a solution to any problem placed in front of me—which requires me to be both determined and adaptable. I remember back in high school when I was an exchange student, I was told to start off on the right foot with my host family with the mantra, 'It's not right, it's not wrong, it's just different'. That is something I have always kept in my mind.

HC Insider: What are you passionate about and how has that fuelled your success?

AS: My key driver in life is that things should be fair. That comes back to making sure that everyone is given an opportunity to show what they can do. When you lead teams, it's important to give them space, opportunities, and support. I know the pandemic was difficult for everyone, in different ways, for different people. But for some women who had previously travelled frequently for work, the lack of travel suddenly levelled the workplace. I know there are a different set of challenges at home, but for once, some women like me, didn't have to make stressful decisions about travel and who would look after everything at home.

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HC Insider: As part of the company's ED&I strategy, Tate & Lyle is committed to all its employees being seen, heard and valued. How do you connect your work and business objectives to the diversity and inclusion goals of the organisation?

AS: Every business unit and function in every region is developing its own equity, diversity and inclusion action plans. It's more than a commitment because we're working towards becoming more equitable, diverse and inclusive by taking action together. It's about embedding ED&I into our business by design. We want to bring diversity of thought into our teams and unlock business growth that ultimately benefits society.

One example of connecting our work to business objectives and ED&I goals is the development of a sustainable agriculture programme for stevia. We've done this in a region in China where many small farms are predominantly women owned/family owned. We focused on fertiliser optimisation and soil sampling and identified opportunities where the right actions could be directly linked to improving soil health, local water quality and greenhouse gas emission reductions. Improving these areas had a positive impact on the farmers in the local community by increasing productivity and yields.

“My advice for anyone that is about to embark on their career journey with a mentor would be to stay open to taking on new challenges and suggestions.”

HC Insider: How have you helped to develop and encourage talent?

AS: I always try to listen to my team and understand them both inside and outside of work. I want my team to bring their authentic self to the workplace when pitching ideas, and they can only do this if I show I can listen without judgement. I love new ideas and I encourage that curiosity by

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... humble way and now there are so many chapters connecting women and allies throughout the organisation. I use the meetings to listen to new ideas and perspectives. Some of the discussions have influenced me by making me think about the challenges that aren't visible to me but might be felt by members of my team. This helps to develop solidarity and takes you beyond the point of just turning up to work to carry out your tasks. We have external speakers who come and talk to the group, people who have written books or are board members at other companies, and we also provide a platform for our colleagues to advocate for the changes they are passionate about making for a better future. The benefits of achieving diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace are clear. The company is sending the message about its commitment to ensuring that all employees are seen, heard, and valued. Employee Resource Groups, such as IGNITE, turn that awareness of commitment into action.

HC Insider: Have you benefited from mentoring and are you a mentor yourself?

AS: I have been a mentor for over 10 years. Something I have felt passionate about is helping women that are returning to work after having a baby. Having lived in the UK, I know that maternity leave there is much longer than it is in the US, so it's important that I support mothers returning after taking leave. There is so much to juggle, and you put a lot of pressure on yourself to do everything. I try to help as a mentor by using my life experience. Having resources like Tate & Lyle's Equal Parental Leave policy—which provides employees across the world with a minimum of 16 weeks full-paid parental leave covering birth, adoption, foster to adopt and surrogacy—enhances these types of conversations in a mentoring relationship. My advice for anyone that is about to embark on their journey with a mentor would be to stay open to taking on new challenges and suggestions. Also, make sure you meet consistently so that you allow for the relationship to evolve in a positive way.

Abigail's top tips for career success:

My first top tip is to be open to new experiences. Different people, places and spaces may bring you on a journey you never expected, but love.