



# Interview - Anne- Cathrin Lessel

## WP 2

### Activity 1 (Leaders Interview)

Developed by Wisamar | July, 2025

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## Interview Metadata

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Date of Interview:	30.07.2025
Interviewer Name:	Franziska Bommas
Consent for data collection	yes
Additional remarks on the interview	The interview was conducted in writing.

## Meet the leader

Name:	Anne-Cathrin Lessel
Age:	37
Gender:	female
Current role and position:	Artistic Director & Managing Director LOFFT – DAS THEATER
Years of Work Experience:	14
Years in Leadership Roles:	6
Organization:	LOFFT – DAS THEATER
Sector of Activity:	Non-profit company
Country / City:	Germany, Leipzig
Organization Size:	<input type="checkbox"/> Micro x Small <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Large



## Main Interview Content

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Interview Section	Summary of Answers	Selected Quotes
<p>The Path to Leadership Key moments, challenges, values</p>	<p>Her journey into leadership began early, during her university years, when she became actively involved in supporting emerging artists at LOFFT through volunteer work. This engagement led to her being elected to the LOFFT board as a representative of the youth division. At just 23, she was approached by the organization and asked if she would consider taking on the role of Program and Production Director. Despite having limited professional experience at the time, she accepted the offer, feeling both honored and encouraged by the trust others placed in her abilities.</p> <p>From the outset, she remained not only in charge of programming and production but also continued her involvement on the board, working closely with the then-artistic leadership. This allowed her early access to strategic decision-making and development processes. Within a short time, she became the deputy to the artistic and executive leadership. When it became clear in late 2017 that the current leadership would step down by mid-2019, the board asked her to take over the directorship. After a brief period of reflection, she agreed. The extended transition period provided her with a valuable opportunity to deeply engage with all aspects of running the theater and to grow into her new responsibilities.</p> <p>One of the defining values of her leadership has been long-term thinking. From the beginning of her tenure, she developed a 10-year vision for both the organization and her own leadership. Following three years in the role—shaped significantly by the complexities of the pandemic—she felt it was important to revisit and realign this vision with her team. To do so, she and the team organized a two-day retreat with all permanent staff, guided by a professional external facilitator. The retreat allowed the team to critically assess their workflows, identify areas for improvement, and collectively commit to more effective collaboration.</p> <p>What stood out most during this process was the part where individual and shared visions for the future of LOFFT were explored. To her surprise and</p>	<p>“In conclusion, I can say that key people in my professional career believed in my abilities and encouraged me to take the next steps in my professional career, even in my early years of employment.”</p> <p>“Together, we discovered, much to my surprise, that the employees have similar visions for the future of LOFFT as I do and that we are truly “looking in the same direction.” It was a wonderful moment for me to know that the team stands behind me and my plans as director.”</p>





	<p>great satisfaction, it became clear that the team not only supported her plans but also shared remarkably similar aspirations for the organization’s future. This alignment affirmed her belief in collaborative leadership and in the importance of creating spaces where trust, vision, and shared responsibility can flourish.</p>	
<p>Your Approach to Leading Inclusion, decision-making, vision</p>	<p>Her approach to inclusive leadership is rooted in transparency, regular communication, and creating both formal and informal spaces for connection. At LOFFT, she has established various regular team meetings to ensure that all staff members are informed, heard, and connected. These include planning-focused meetings as well as quarterly gatherings where team members share updates on their work. These sessions not only improve internal communication but also foster mutual understanding across departments—especially during periods of increased workload or tight deadlines.</p> <p>Beyond structured meetings, she has introduced monthly team lunches, where two staff members cook for the group on a rotating basis. These informal moments help strengthen interpersonal bonds and provide a space for relaxed exchange, which she sees as a key pillar of team-building in a high-paced cultural environment.</p> <p>One of the most impactful changes she initiated was the introduction of staff retreats—something that had not existed at LOFFT before her leadership. These off-site sessions gave the team time and space to reflect, align, and develop a stronger shared identity. As a result, she observed a notable shift in the team’s culture: a greater sense of mutual appreciation, stronger cohesion, and increased initiative among staff to take ownership and drive improvements within their respective areas. For her, this confirmed the value of intentionally investing time and space outside of daily routines to co-create a more inclusive and engaged organizational culture.</p>	<p>“By initiating retreats for our team, which took place for the first time at LOFFT under my leadership, I got the feeling that the team as a whole treats each other with even more respect and sees itself more as a unified group that helps shape the theater.”</p>
<p>Driving Change Strategies for sustainable and positive outcomes</p>	<p>Her leadership approach is guided by reflection, consultation, and shared responsibility. In difficult or unclear situations, she avoids making impulsive decisions. Even under time pressure, she consciously creates space to consider options and seeks internal input by discussing decisions with department heads. When she feels particularly uncertain, she reaches out to trusted colleagues in leadership positions at other theaters to draw from their experience and perspectives.</p> <p>Collaboration and shared responsibility are central to her leadership values. She regularly emphasizes to her team that, while she is ready to take responsibility</p>	<p>“It is important to me not to make decisions based on emotion or impulse.”</p> <p>“It is important to me to regularly remind my team that, although I am happy to take responsibility as a manager and stand up for the team in difficult situations, I also try to signal to my team</p>





	<p>and protect the team during difficult moments, real strength comes from collective commitment and unity. Her goal is to structure departments in a way that enables them to function independently, make their own decisions, and represent those confidently to the outside. She prefers to moderate and support team-driven initiatives rather than having to push everything herself—a principle she communicates clearly and transparently.</p> <p>Sustainability and inclusion are embedded not just in her leadership language, but also in concrete action. In 2019, she initiated the creation of an inclusive dance company, FORWARD DANCE COMPANY, embedding inclusion as a visible, structural part of LOFFT. By openly prioritizing sustainability and inclusion, she inspired others in the organization to take ownership of these topics without formal delegation. Teams in technical and administrative departments began developing their own strategies and even funding models to increase the theater's sustainability, which are then refined in dialogue with her. She sees long-term progress as a series of achievable steps rather than a rush toward unrealistic goals. By setting intermediate milestones and allowing for gradual implementation, she ensures that the organization evolves in a sustainable, steady, and team-driven manner.</p>	<p>that, as a manager, I am only as “strong” as they are behind me and that we are developing our theater together.”</p> <p>“My credo in team leadership is: I would rather slow down employees' activities and initiatives when they become too intense than always having to push and guide everything myself.”</p> <p>“By communicating to the team that sustainability and inclusion are important issues for me as a manager, I was able to create transparency, which enabled other colleagues in the team to take primary responsibility for these issues and develop them organically.”</p> <p>“It is also important to mention that, as the manager, I set milestones and not all goals have to be achieved at once.”</p>
<p>Bias &amp; Belonging Tools, practices, awareness</p>	<p>An awareness concept was co-developed through a collaborative process involving the entire team. This framework applies not only internally—to guide team collaboration and interaction with artists—but also externally, shaping the theater’s relationship with its audiences. It was essential to her that the concept be developed collectively, rather than being handed down from leadership, ensuring that all team members identify with it and support its implementation.</p> <p>As part of this process, the team elected two trusted representatives who serve as first points of contact in cases of conflict. This step was taken to decentralize power dynamics and provide multiple accessible pathways for addressing issues.</p>	<p>“It was important to us that all colleagues in the team supported the awareness concept and that it was not simply imposed by management as a tool for collaboration.”</p> <p>“In regular employee meetings, as a manager, I try to obtain feedback on teamwork. But I also ask what feedback</p>





	<p>She also fosters a culture of open dialogue and self-reflection through regular staff conversations. These meetings provide space not only for feedback on teamwork but also for staff to share their reflections on her leadership, allowing her to monitor and adjust her own practice. In conflict situations, she prioritizes active listening and voluntary mediation, offering her support without imposing herself—thus creating room for autonomy while signaling availability and care.</p>	<p>my colleagues have for me as a manager.”</p>
<p>Sharing What Works Inspiration, examples, transferable tools</p>	<p>Her leadership practice includes routines and approaches that can serve as valuable examples for others aiming to foster inclusion and diversity. A key element is her ongoing self-reflection, through which she regularly examines her own leadership behavior. In addition, she actively seeks dialogue with peers in theater leadership to exchange experiences and learn how inclusive leadership models are applied in different organizational contexts.</p> <p>She draws inspiration and practical knowledge from a variety of sources—reading extensively on agile leadership and modern organizational culture, while also engaging with leaders from other sectors to foster cross-sector knowledge transfer. In collaboration with the professional development network Common Purpose, she is currently designing and implementing a multi-month leadership training program, which she has openly shared with her team.</p>	<p>“I regularly try to review my own actions and thus also reflect on myself as a manager.”</p> <p>“On the one hand, I read a lot about agile leadership styles and corporate culture in the modern working world. On the other hand, I regularly try to exchange ideas with managers from other areas of society and generate knowledge transfer.”</p>





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