Interview - Saskia Schuppener

WP 2

Activity 1 (Leaders Interview)

Developed by Wisamar| July, 2025

Interview Metadata

Date of Interview:	02.07.2025
Interviewer Name:	Franziska Bommas
Consent for data collection	Yes
Additional remarks on the interview	The interview was conducted in person.

Meet the leader

Name:	Saskia Schuppener
Age:	49
Gender:	female
Current role and position:	Professor, Head of the Institute for Special Needs Education (University of Leipzig)
Years of Work Experience:	26 years
Years in Leadership Roles:	21 years
Organization:	University of Leipzig
Sector of Activity:	Higher Education
Country / City:	Germany/ Leipzig
Organization Size:	☐Micro ☐Small ☐Medium ⨯ Large

Main Interview Content

Interview Section	Summary of Answers	Selected Quotes
The Path to Leadership Key moments, challenges, values	The interviewee describes her path into leadership roles, especially her professorship and institute directorship, as unplanned and shaped more by external encouragement and recognition than by personal ambition or strategic career planning. Her professorship came through invitation rather than a traditional application process, and she emphasizes that she did not initially aspire to a leadership role. Despite that, she quickly grew into the role and began to embrace the challenges, learning through experience, navigating conflicts, and reflecting deeply on her development. She sees leadership as a continuous learning and development process, shaped by both internal and external pressures. Looking back, she admits that a more deliberate approach might have helped her avoid some pitfalls, but it may also have made her less open, collaborative, and curious.

She views her role as institute director not as a position of power, but as a shared responsibility within the self-governance structure of the university, where collective responsibility is rotated among faculty members. The position is not financially compensated or awarded through a competitive process, but instead decided internally, often based on who has capacity at a given time. She describes it as a "solidarity-based investment", undertaken not for personal benefit, but to support the functioning of the institution. She herself prefers this role over others (such as faculty-level leadership) precisely because she does not seek additional leadership burdens and while she approaches her leadership duties with maximum commitment, she also describes representative duties as stressful and burdensome.
The concept of leadership itself feels unfamiliar to her; she would not naturally apply the term to herself, perhaps , she reflects, due to gendered perceptions of leadership.

She emphasizes transparency, cooperation, authenticity, and communication at eye level as core principles. She intentionally creates spaces for reflection, dialogue, and supervision to support both staff well-being and institutional growth. She highlights that transparency is a constant challenge, especially given the volume and complexity of tasks. It's not about deliberately withholding information, but about the limits of time and | "We are very cooperative, very solidaristic, and within the framework of self-governance, we always see our contribution as a form of solidarity."

"Transparency and cooperation are incredibly important to me as core principles. I truly believe they stand above everything else, especially when paired with authenticity."

"I'm also acting as a representative for a large institute community, including administrative staff, academic employees, students, and colleagues from both the mid-level faculty and the full professorship. That's why I see it as absolutely essential to emphasize cooperation, exchange, and open communication at eye level."

"At the same time, I also see it as highly important to be deeply |

	communication. Therefore, being transparent remains an aspirational value that needs constant attention. Because she sees her role as representing a broad community — including administrative staff, students, mid-level academics, and professors — she emphasizes that leadership is not a solo endeavor, but one that must be grounded in collective processes and open dialogue. She actively creates spaces for reflection and feedback, both at the professorship level and the broader institute. These include team meetings, retreats, project meetings, and digital platforms like Trello and Slack. On the institutional level, they use Moodle for digital communication and hold regular in-person meetings (such as staff assemblies and institute councils) to ensure broad participation and ownership of decisions. One current example is the planned renaming of the institute. She insists this process must come from the entire community, not just from the leadership positions, even if not everyone has the time or capacity to engage. Still, creating opportunities for participation is central to her leadership philosophy. In terms of challenges, she notes the importance of recognizing and addressing workplace stress. The team intentionally uses supervision and support formats to carve out reflective spaces in a packed day-to-day schedule. These processes, including external moderation and health promotion, have helped them surface issues that might otherwise remain hidden. These shared practices, she explains, lead to greater job satisfaction, lower absenteeism, and better health outcomes — which benefit not only the team, but the institution and university as a whole. She sees it as part of her mission to ensure people take their vacation, feel a sense of belonging, and stay healthy wherever possible. Family-friendliness, flexibility, and mutual help in managing workload are important pillars of this ethos.	attentive to experiences of stress and strain."
Your Approach to Leading Inclusion, decision-making, vision	The interviewee describes her leadership approach as inclusive, participatory, and grounded in empathy, authenticity, and cooperation. She actively fosters a working culture where everyone should feel seen, heard, and valued, regardless of their role, background, or qualification level.	"Yes, but it's a tough demand, but also an indispensable one, I think, that everyone feels seen and heard in the sense that they are hopefully resilient enough to be able to

She strives to always have an open ear for team members' concerns, though she acknowledges the challenges of emotional labor and limits to availability. To manage this, the team introduced clear door-signaling rules:

- A closed door means "interrupt only in emergencies,"
- An ajar door means "come in if it's important,"
- A fully open door signals open availability, even for minor concerns.

She emphasizes the importance of formal and informal spaces for reflection and participation:

- University-mandated employee reviews ensure regular, structured time for every team member to speak about their satisfaction and well-being.
- She is involved in various small team structures (teaching, exams, committees, research, and transfer projects), all of which provide additional spaces for communication and feedback.
- They also engage in supervision and counseling formats, especially when dealing with emotional stress or team dynamics.

A standout feature of her leadership is the inclusion of colleagues from non-academic backgrounds, such as people working in workplaces for individuals with disabilities, who have held long-term external work placements within the team. This requires deep sensitivity to accessibility, team processes, and inclusive communication.
To create safe spaces for emotional expression and conflict resolution, they launched a "Denkarium" (named after the "Pensieve" from *Harry Potter*), a reflection forum initiated by one of the inclusion officers. This space serves as an internal supervision-style setting where issues can be raised freely and respectfully.
She emphasizes the importance of being attuned to who feels unseen, unheard, or excluded — and being responsive to signs of imbalance, harm, or withdrawal. The team shares a high level of perceptiveness and a strong commitment to heterogeneity and anti-discrimination, which shapes the team culture.
Although no specific turning point marks a cultural shift, she sees her role in modeling flat hierarchies and cooperative leadership as having a ripple effect — particularly in environments where more traditional, top-down styles still dominate. She hopes this "contagious" collaborative style has inspired small changes even beyond her immediate team.

express their discontent at any time, to be able to express criticism, to be able to rebel against anything they perceive as unfair or where they say, I don't agree with that, and I think it's always a challenge to be sensitive enough."

"Or there were moments when I felt like I wasn't doing a good job anymore and couldn't always look back and say, "I see you, I'm open to all your concerns, come anytime."

"Yes, I think I always try to contribute to this by sharing the perspective and experience of flat hierarchies and the benefits I derive from them, the gains, the relief, the enrichment I get from them, in other words, by setting an example and passing it on. […] But I do believe that you also contribute to small processes of change, or perhaps to irritation among colleagues who may practice a more authoritarian, restrictive management style, and that you thereby initiate or help shape processes without necessarily intending to do so.

	She reflects positively on periods where women held all leadership roles at the faculty level — including three institute directors and a female dean — and describes that time as marked by solidarity, mutual support, and shared experience in managing leadership and family responsibilities. As indicators of successful inclusive leadership, she points to: ● A positive team atmosphere, ● Willingness to connect beyond work, ● Openness to sharing personal concerns, ● Mutual understanding despite time pressure, ● And strong interpersonal support across roles.	"The four of us, including the dean's advisor, who is also female, sat together as women and were very aware of issues such as double burdens, career, family, and the fact that we had all taken on responsibility in leadership and management positions."
Driving Change Strategies for sustainable and positive outcomes	The interviewee emphasizes that she rarely makes decisions alone, especially when they are complex, sensitive, or potentially in conflict with systemic structures. Instead, she relies on collaborative reflection and team-based decision-making, which she sees as both a protective mechanism and a strength. Even in time-sensitive contexts, she tries to consult with others rather than acting unilaterally. Decisions at the professorship and institute level are made collectively, often through consensus, and when consensus is not possible, at least through transparent majority decisions. This process relies on a culture of constructive discussion and respectful disagreement, which she finds both emotionally relieving and structurally sustainable. In terms of team collaboration and shared responsibility, she highlights the importance of: ● Clearly defined yet flexible roles, depending on people's positions (e.g. teaching, research, transfer projects). ● A culture of invitation rather than assignment: when new roles, projects, or committees arise, she opens the floor by asking who is interested or would like to take part, rather than delegating top-down. ● Matching responsibilities with interests and life situations — considering who is currently able or willing to take on more, who might prefer a background role, and who is motivated to step into leadership or organizational tasks. She fosters collaborative negotiation around responsibilities, aiming for fair distribution based on interest, capacity, and thematic fit. Notably, while she may formally be listed as project lead on several initiatives, in reality, much of the leadership is delegated, with team members independently managing large	"But the most important thing for me when it comes to making decisions is actually discussing and reflecting with everyone, or as many people as possible, who are affected by the decision."

	portions. This is seen not as a loss of control but as a necessary and trust-based redistribution of leadership in a highly collaborative environment. Ultimately, she measures positive impact and sustainability by: ● The emotional tone of the team — whether people feel supported and enjoy being together even outside work. ● The presence of empathy, shared understanding, and openness for private concerns. ● The team's ability to navigate structural time pressures without losing solidarity. ● The emergence of a culture of mutual care, voluntary responsibility, and constructive participation — without a need for formal evaluation tools, as it is reflected in the day-to-day team atmosphere.	

Bias & Belonging Tools, practices, awareness	The interviewee emphasizes that her team works with a strong foundation in critical theory and maintains a deeply self-reflective, anti-hegemonic stance.
	While there may not be rigid tools or checklists in place, several practices and cultural elements form their approach to identifying and addressing bias:
	● Intentional reflection spaces: The team creates explicit settings for personal and collective reflection, both formally and informally.
	● Biographical diversity: The diversity of lived experience within the team (educational, cultural, biographical) inherently requires heightened sensitivity and prevents assumptions of uniform academic socialization.
	● Listening as a practice: Deep, respectful listening is a core tool, enabling team members to surface implicit biases and challenge them.
	● Reflexive teaching and research methods: In both seminars and research teams, they use cooperative and reflective methods, such as:
	   ● Biographical work (in teaching),
	   ● Collaborative reflection tools,
	   ● Inclusive feedback culture,
	   to address biases and support inclusive participation.
	● Feedback culture: Emphasis is placed on non-hierarchical, constructive feedback — asking who is allowed to give feedback to whom, and how to create a safe space where feedback doesn't cause harm, but opens space for growth.
	
	The team aspires to ensure that everyone feels heard, seen, and included, especially given the team's diversity. Openness about personal biases is encouraged rather than stigmatized — creating an environment where team members can say: *"I came in with*
		"I believe that a very diverse team is a good starting point, where you can't help but assume that, yes, we are all in the same league here and we are all academically socialized here in this and that way, but that diversity is simply always clearly taken into account from the outset and that you can really openly address your own prejudices and perhaps also openly say, yes, I actually started with a completely different idea."

	a different assumption", and reflect together. She acknowledges this as a work in progress — they may not always achieve full inclusion or reflection, but it remains an ongoing, conscious effort.	
Sharing What Works Inspiration, examples, transferable tools	In reflecting on what might be transferable to other teams and institutions, the interviewee emphasized the importance of making use of existing resources within one's own organization. For instance, she shared a striking example from her university, where her team turned out to be the only one making use of a free counseling and supervision service offered by the department for mental health - an offer that had gone largely unnoticed by the wider university community. This, she explained, highlights the need to be proactive and informed: many institutions already provide helpful tools and services to support psychological well-being and healthy team dynamics, but they often remain underutilized simply because people are unaware of them. Beyond formal services, she stressed the value of informal, team-building activities such as group outings, walks, or even just meeting up for a drink outside the university setting. These moments, she said, help cultivate trust and a sense of shared identity, which are crucial for fostering inclusion and resilience. She also spoke of the benefits of structured collective time—such as team retreats—which offer a space for reflection, coordination, and regeneration. In this context, financial resources are not a minor detail but a key enabler. Whether it's attending a conference, organizing a retreat, or engaging in training, time and money often go hand in hand, and sustainable inclusion work requires both. The interviewee described how she actively works to secure funding when needed, either from internal budgets or external sources such as foundations, and encourages her team members to voice their interests and developmental needs. Whether someone wishes to attend a specific workshop, pursue a training, or take on a new role, the aim is always to explore together how that can be made possible. This openness, she explained, helps create a culture in which all team members can see themselves as co-shaping the space and contributing to its development. Over time, she noted, this kind of structure becomes somewhat self-sustaining: once funding streams and supportive practices are in place, they can be drawn on repeatedly and expanded. Ultimately, her approach illustrates how inclusion and team health are not abstract ideals, but lived practices that require intentional organization, active listening, and a long-term commitment to creating space—for people, for conversations, and for growth.	"In order to develop and maintain a good team culture, I actually think joint activities such as excursions are really important and enjoyable, even if they can't always be organized for the entire group. But it's also important to consider what would fulfill us all in some way, in the sense that we need to meet outside of the university, go for a walk, go out for adrink, or even specifically go back to a team retreat." "Yes, I think it's really important and sustainable not to lose sight of the fact that time sometimes costs money, or often costs money, and that certain structures don't come for free, just by allowing yourself time and thinking and organizing a lot for the team and also acquiring funding." "Once you've acquired such structures, you can always fall back on funding from foundations or similar sources, for example, and

		then you have a great network to say, "Hey, that's a great idea, let's do it, and let's try to get funding for it."

FITFOR**THE**
FUTURE

Scan for more

fit4thefuture.eu