PWA ROME

PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION

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"Poise and Purpose"
Leadership by Example

*by **Danielle DeVine** | Leadership writer Professional Women's Association*

Anna Gricini is Regional Director of Sales and Marketing at Rocco Forte hotels, overseeing flagship properties such as the Hotel Savoy in Florence as well as the Hotel de la Ville and the Hotel de Russie in Rome. A Milan native with a degree in Foreign Languages and Literatures, she launched her career there before moving to Rome in 2009. Her contribution to the growth of luxury hospitality in Italy and her key role in the successful launch of several landmark hotels led to her being awarded the Donna di Roma prize this year in the Travel Category.

On a sweltering summer afternoon, Anna welcomed PWA President Catherine Tondelli and me for a conversation at the outdoor café of the Hotel de Russie. Despite the hustle and bustle of our surroundings, she was calm and composed, though always lively, engaging and dynamic. Over the course of our time together, Anna maintained that remarkable poise, immaculately groomed and supremely calm, notwithstanding the oppressive heat. It became clear that this serene, yet animated and responsive presence, is not only a defining trait of Anna as a leader, but also as a person.

Our conversation ranged widely—from her passion for cooking and art to the way she draws on elements of Buddhist philosophy to preserve that rare sense of balance. We spoke about her love for Kandinsky and Mirò, and when she discovered that Artemisia Gentileschi grew up in an atelier on Via Margutta before moving to Florence, she immediately envisioned a potential event celebrating that link between the Savoy in Florence and the De Russie in Rome. She also shared just how she achieves and sustains that unflappable and reassuring sense of serenity, as well as her thoughts on the next generation of women in hospitality, about what it means to really be a leader and how to maintain equanimity despite the burdens and pressures of leadership.

You recently received the Donna di Roma award. What did this recognition mean to you on a personal level? And what message do you think it sends to other women in your industry?

Receiving the Donna di Roma award was a deeply meaningful moment for me, both personally and professionally. It felt like a recognition not only of my individual journey, but also of the collective efforts of so many talented people I've had the privilege to work with throughout the years.

I believe this recognition sends a powerful message to other women in our industry and outside it: that dedication, vision, and resilience are seen and valued. It's a reminder that there is space for women to lead, to shape the future of luxury hospitality, and to do so with authenticity and strength. I hope it inspires others to keep pushing forward, believing in their voice and their unique path.

On a personal level, this award gave me the opportunity to pause and reflect on what I've built over the years—something that's often difficult in the fast pace of professional life. Sometimes it's truly meaningful to gain perspective on how others see you from the outside; it's a beautiful form of recognition.

It also allowed me to connect with other women who, like me, have achieved important milestones across different industries. That was incredibly enriching and a powerful reminder of the importance of networking among women in leadership—supporting, learning from, and uplifting one another as we continue to grow.

Can you describe the course your career has taken and what led you to your current position?

I started my career as a Sales Executive at Hilton in 1995 and then moved to Starwood as a Sales Manager. I grew within the company, becoming Director of Sales and later Area Director of Sales and Marketing for the three Starwood properties in Milan. In 2003, following the sale of Hotel Principe di Savoia, I joined the Dorchester Collection. This was a truly enriching experience – the transition of such an important property from a large international group to a smaller one was both challenging and formative. In 2009, Rocco Forte Hotels

invited me to lead the Sales and Marketing temams at Hotel de Russie and Hotel Savoy. Since then, my responsibilities have grown, and I now serve as Regional Director of Sales and Marketing.

You studied languages at university?

Yes, I studied languages at the University Institute of Moden Languages in Milan.

When you chose that major, did you already have hospitality in mind, or did that come later?

No, that happened by chance. I studied languages and literature because I loved humanities. I paired German and English literature with language studies because I was drawn to international contexts. I already saw myself in an international dimension—I didn't see myself in something too local… But I had never considered hospitality. It happened quite randomly: a dear friend of mine, who studied the same subjects as I did but was a year ahead, had already entered the workforce. She told me about an open position at the international office of Hilton in Milan. That's how my journey began.

Did you move abroad for your career?

No, I started working in Milan and I only moved to Rome in 2009. Of course, I traveled a lot because the sales world makes you travel everywhere. I really did travel extensively in my career—United States, South America, Asia, Japan, India—I truly went all over. But I never actually moved abroad; I was never tempted to live permanently in another country. For various reasons, I always traveled, explored… but always came back to Italy.

I never thought, "I'll go live in the U.S." or "I'll go live in London." Looking back now, maybe a few years abroad would have enriched me even more, broadened my vision even more. But it wasn't in the cards at the time. And in the end, I can't complain—I've had an incredibly international career while staying in Italy.

What are some of the most significant achievements in your career of which you are particularly proud?

I'm particularly proud of contributing to the repositioning of Hotel Principe di Savoia under the Dorchester Collection. Another major achievement has been supporting the growth of Rocco Forte's Italian portfolio, with new openings such as Hotel de a Ville in Rome, Masseria Torre Maizza in Puglia, and Villa Igiea in Palermo. Today, I take great pride in leading a team of talented, motivated professionals. We face challenges, celebrate successes, and enjoy our work together every day.

Now that Rome has become your home, do you think you will stay here, or maybe one day you would like to return to Milan where you grew up?

PWA is a powerful space for networking among brilliant women, learning from.them I now see Milan much more as a destination; that is, as the city that has formed me, that has trained me. I am very grateful for the training I had there, from my studies to my first work experiences. In my opinion, I had a very structured training in Milan, but Rome is a great fit for me. Romans are fantastic, they have

that spontaneity, and that bit of lightness, which in Milan you may not always be able to find. Between work and personal life, I must say, I really like them.

I like to experience a bit of everything, so I could see myself retiring one day to an area that neighbors Rome but where it is less chaotic, quieter. A place from which you can still get to the city easily, because otherwise I would get bored. But maybe a place where there are small villages; it could be an area outside Rome, in Tuscany, anywhere where you have a more relaxed pace of life, because the city inevitably involves you a lot in its fast pace.

How do you see Milan, and how does it compare to Rome?

Milan is efficient, dynamic, modern; things move quickly. It's structured, functional. Rome has a different rhythm; it's more layered, sometimes slower, but it gives you time to reflect. It's poetic.

If I asked you to pick one word for Milan and one word for Rome, which words would you choose?

"Efficiency" for Milan. "Poetry" for Rome.
Rome is the kind of city where—despite everything not always working perfectly—something greater touches you every day. The light, a detail, a column, a scent. It opens your mind.

Has your leadership style changed depending on where you are?

Absolutely. In Milan, I was more rigid. Results-oriented, faster, more formal. In Rome, I've softened. Here, I listen more; I consider the context more. This job teaches you that the human side is never secondary. And in hospitality, it's everything. You can't lead with formulas; you have to be present.

Has that affected your leadership style, too?

Yes, definitely. I used to think leadership meant having all the answers, being in control. But over time, I've realized it's much more about listening, creating space for others to grow, and having the courage to say, I don't know.

It's also about empowering others and helping them discover their own potential. These days, with younger generations entering the workforce, I find myself learning a lot from them too. They're very aware, very purpose-driven. They ask tough questions. It keeps you on your toes—in a good way.

If you had to describe yourself in three words, what would they be?

Organized, generous, and discreet.

What is the most gratifying thing about your work—and the most challenging aspect?

The thing that gratifies me the most is the chance to be very creative, to actually be the creator of new projects.

I really enjoy analyzing situations and coming up with creative, project-based ideas that can then be developed. That's something I really love. And of course, having a certain level of autonomy and ownership – but also responsibility. However, I have to say that, character-wise, I'm not afraid of responsibility. Sometimes fear can

hold people back. But my enthusiasm and drive often outweigh the rational voice that might say, But what if…"

So that sense of responsibility doesn't weigh on you?

No, it doesn't weigh on me.

On the contrary, it sounds as if it motivates you?

Yes, it motivates me.

That's beautiful. That's a real leadership quality—it's not something everyone has.

Exactly. It's a quality I discovered in myself, because you become a leader, but you may not know you have it at first. Realizing that not everyone has that predisposition is quite interesting.

What are some of the most important lessons about leadership that you have learned along the way?

Team management is arguably the most complex part of being a leader. It requires constant attention and must be treated as a priority. Only through effective teamwork can real and lasting results be achieved.

What does leadership mean to you on a personal level?

First of all, I see myself as a leader who wants to lead by example, in the sense that I don't feel that I am above the others or superior to them: I feel like I'm part of the team. We work together. While I have different responsibilities, I don't look at things from above. I try to share, to feel like part of a unified project.

At the same time, I believe a leader should also be inspiring. You need to represent a model—a model of dedication and professionalism. I'm very organized, for example. My team members often ask, "How do you remember all these things? or How do you keep everything under control? That's one way I lead.

In addition, professional ethics are also very important. You still have to represent a role model—someone people can look up to. So, on one hand, you are part of the group, but on the other, you also have to stand out. You must embody a model that's also authoritative. There must be a sort of natural leadership, because otherwise people won't follow you.

How would you describe your leadership style, and how has it evolved over time?

My leadership style has always been rooted in leading by example. I've always taken an active role in every project, never observing from a distance. I believe this hands-on approach is one of my greatest strengths. Over time, I've learned to be more flexible and to ease up on the perfectionism I once applied rigorously to both myself and others. Today, I believe leadership also means listening, delegating, and appreciating the diverse strengths and perspectives within a team.

If you had to summarize your leadership philosophy in one sentence, what would it be?

Lead by example. Always. Because when you lead by example, you inspire trust. People see that you don't just demand things—you do them too. And that creates credibility. And I would add: listen. Leadership is also about listening.

Have you encountered difficulties as a woman in your sector?

No, I'm someone who is conscientious. A person who reflects, who speaks openly, who works hard. I've never felt any negative judgment for being a woman. And I've also been lucky; I've always worked with people who weren't closed off to the idea of working with women.

When I'm working, I don't think about the fact that I'm a woman. That is, I've never approached my work thinking, I'm a woman, so this will be harder or different. I've always interacted with men very naturally, working side by side with them, as an equal. Maybe it's an ability I have—to rise above the question of gender. And the context matters too. Maybe that's also why I never felt blocked; I was lucky to work in environments where people valued competence, not gender. It's also about being in the right place, with the right people.

If there were a young woman today who wanted to follow in your footsteps—someone who sees you as a role model—what advice would you give her?

I can say that to get where I am today, I've worked incredibly hard. I've also made sacrifices. I've really given everything -- I've never held back. And maybe even too much at times, I must admit.

Now, I think younger generations have a better sense of balance --what we now call work-life balance. Thirty years ago, when I started my career, it was almost implied -- without anyone needing to say it -- that you had to give everything to achieve success.

Maybe it's also my nature, because as I said earlier, I don't hold back. I always try, I always work hard, always with professionalism. I leave nothing to chance. I'm very organized, very precise, very attentive to detail. I dedicate a lot of time to research, to study, to going deeper -- all of which I think are fundamental and essential. I wouldn't feel confident giving a speech or tackling a subject if I wasn't prepared. I don't like improvising; I enjoy being prepared.

So my advice is this: yes, respect the work-life balance, because I think younger generations are more fortunate in that regard.

They're already one step ahead, I think. They don't need to prove themselves as much as we did. However, we shouldn't go too far in the opposite direction either. Because sacrifice, preparation, and dedication are still fundamental, and without them, you cannot reach the place you want to go. If someone truly wants to pursue a career, they must remain very focused, make sure they are prepared, and not shy away from always going deeper. They need to be determined and willing to sacrifice when necessary.

Was there a mentor for you in your workplace?

No, not in the work environment, there wasn't. I did a bit on my own; in fact, I have to say that I am quite proud of this, that I did not have great help but that I was able to understand what I had to do and to achieve goals on my own.

Speaking of the goals you have achieved greatly, what does success mean to you today? Has this definition changed over time?

Has my definition of success has changed? Yes, it has changed because before I thought that success was just reaching a position without seeing everything behind it. Success meant feeling good in that position, of living it well, of having the ability to face all challenges in a balanced way. But this aspect, for example, has changed a lot for me. That is, at the beginning, I felt much more: I got angry, I felt keenly all this weight of responsibility, and it was not positive.

Now, I can face even the most complicated situations with a sense of calm and an ability to not just respond, but also to reassure others. You have responsibility towards the others on your team; because if you are a hysterical boss, you don't give them peace of mind. Instead, the fact that I always have the answer, I always try to reassure, I try not to exaggerate the problems, but on the contrary, to see the solution, all of that contributes to my belief that I have achieved a very positive, very balanced ability to manage my professional role.

Who are the women who have inspired you the most?

My mother, who next week will be 90 years old, has always been very inspiring to me, because she is a strong woman. A strong woman who on the one hand has

always pushed me a bit, who was very ambitious on my behalf; she believed that I could achieve things, so she spurred me on a lot.

On the other hand, she is also the person with whom I have always talked about everything. She is also the person to whom I, perhaps even more than with my father, have always compared myself a lot. She had less opportunity than I did. She worked when she was young, and then she had two children and she dedicated herself entirely to the family. Therefore, maybe she also saw in me a personal fulfillment that she didn't get to have. She has always been, and still is, a very, very important point of reference. I value her advice immensely.

If you could go back in time—and I'm picking an age at random—say you met yourself at 15 years old, would the 15-year-old you be surprised by your life path?

Yes

Why? And what would you say to that 15-year-old version of yourself?

I'm a very sensitive person, and I've always been very determined. I've always had a strong sense of discipline when it came to studying. I was always very good in school, and then I dedicated myself with great effort and a strong spirit of sacrifice in my work.

However, maybe I didn't believe in myself as much back then. Because when you're a teenager, you have all these aspirations, and you often see others as better than you, or you idolize people outside of yourself. So, maybe I saw others as more interesting. Looking back now, I'd say: believe in yourself more. Seeing what I've managed to accomplish, yes—I could have been more confident.

What inspires you, or what are your greatest passions in life?

I have several passions that truly enrich my life. First, I love to cook—it's incredibly relaxing and fulfilling, and it helps me maintain a healthy lifestyle. I'm always searching for new recipes to try, and I was fortunate to work alongside renowned chef Pierluigi Angiolini, which deepened my appreciation for culinary arts.

Travel is another great passion of mine, as it enriches both my personal and professional experiences. But perhaps my deepest love is art—it inspires me, moves me, and constantly offers new perspectives on the world.

My journey with art actually began when I moved from Milan to Rome in 2009 to join Rocco Forte Hotels. While leaving my family behind was initially difficult, my new role brought unexpected opportunities. One of my early directors at Starwood, Dante

Bertelli—who is also an art connoisseur—introduced me to the art world. He took me to auctions where I was able to acquire some pieces, and whenever I travel, I make sure to visit exhibitions.

Working at Hotel de Russie has been particularly meaningful because of its rich artistic heritage. This hotel, with over 200 years of history, has the unique distinction of being where Pablo Picasso stayed for three months in 1917. In 2017, to commemorate the centenary of Picasso's stay in Rome, we organized a special exhibition featuring works from a private collector. The exhibition ran for 2-3 months in our private spaces, exclusively for hotel guests, ensuring proper security for these invaluable pieces. The event was even covered by Corriere della Sera, which was a tremendous achievement for us.

What is your signature dish when you cook? If on your birthday, you could have any dish in the world to eat, what would you choose?

First, the main course: Paccheri done in a very Sicilian way, with bluefin tuna sauce, cherry tomatoes, datterini tomatoes and honey. Then for the second course, let's see…I cook a lot of fish. I enjoy fish couscous and I like octopus with potatoes; and I do it with vacuum cooking, at low temperature, so it comes out very soft. I also love meatballs, although I don't eat meat very often. Vegetarian cusine, such as eggplant meatballs, melanzane alla parmigiano and also a wonderful dish that cannot be rushed, is a caponata.

When you need to recharge your batteries, what do you do or where do you g

The kitchen, where there is always an aspect of creativity. You are creating something. Immediately, not after ten years, and you see it immediately, and taste it immediately, and touch it with your own hands.

What would you be if you didn't do what you're doing now?

I would be a journalist; the concept of researching, studying something deeply and then writing about it and making it something personal is something that fascinates me and appeals to my sense of curiosity.

If you could have a superpower for one day, what would you choose?

I would choose the power to heal people from illness. Sadly, I went through a very painful and challenging time alongside someone I deeply loved, who was affected by an incurable disease. The helplessness of not being able to do anything to ease their suffering left a profound mark on me.

If you could invite three figures from history—past, present, or future—to dinner, who would they be and why? And would you have any questions for them?

I'd invite many artists, because I really love all the themes of Futurism and how poets and visionaries transformed art from figurative into something much more avant-garde. I would Giacomo Balla. I also really love music…I grew up listening to music my brother played—like Pink Floyd. I really love David Gilmour. I love the music and the depth of the lyrics. So yes, the artistic side—music, art—is very much a part of me. But I also have a very concrete side, so who would I invite to represent that? A scientist. A visionary scientist, someone who had insight, intuition, and the ability to create, to overturn things, to invent something completely new: Albert Einstein.

What would you ask them?

I'd ask the creative ones: what are the things that most stimulate their creativity? And to the scientist—or inventor, rather— I'd ask: how does he balance this extraordinary, almost superhuman intelligence with everyday life?

If you were on a deserted island, and could bring three things, what would you bring?

Music. Something to cook with. And the person I love.

What are the values that guide you through difficult or uncertain times?

On a personal level, I would say the fact that I am a very ethically correct person. For several years now, I have been taking a closer look at Buddhist philosophy. There is a teaching regarding how the environment responds: if you have a positive approach, the environment responds to you in a positive way, and vice versa. So, the fact that I am a correct person, who does no harm, who has a positivity in her approach, makes me calmer and gives me strength. And to know that I have not created anything negative that can come back to me.

Meditation helps me to find the answers in myself, so I also do a lot of analysis on myself. I think that if you want something, if you really believe it, and if you pursue it, you can get it. It helps me, the fact that I believe a lot in myself and in my abilities. This whole approach has helped me a lot to be much more balanced and balanced in dealing with everyday life. Because Buddhism says that you are centered, if you have deep roots, right? You are rooted deeply in the ground, so that events can affect you, but minimally. That teaching has helped me to not feel like I

am fluctuating as much between happiness and reacting to potentially negative events. It has taught me that you have to be happy, you must maintain a balance, regardless of what the circumstances are. And that allows you to deal with both the positive and the negative things in a more balanced way, with less oscillation. You are more stable.

Have you been studying Buddhism for a long time?

Since 2005.

How did that come about?

Through a friend of mine, a very dear friend, who started talking to me about Buddhism, and although at the time, I had no big problems to deal with, then later Buddhism certainly helped me to deal with problems.

I don't deny any religion because I see it more than as a religion: I see it as a philosophy of life. But do you know what the big difference is? While Catholicism says: I pray to someone outside of me, Buddhism makes you do work on yourself, so it's very different approach.

Another one of the elements of Buddhism that I practice is the tenet that you must study. That is, you must practice, then meditate, but also study. Because, if you do not have the knowledge, you may not interpret the message well, maybe you have a perception that is not quite the right one.

What do you admire most about the younger generation in your field?

They’re bold in asking questions. They’re not afraid to challenge things, to propose changes. They don’t just want a job—they want purpose. I find that very inspiring.

Do you think the idea of luxury is changing?

Yes. Luxury today is time, space, silence. It's personalization. It's about feeling truly seen. And this is where Rome can shine—if we know how to tell its story better. It needs a narrative that goes beyond clichés. It has so much potential.

Do you think the luxury hospitality world is adapting to that shift?

I think it must. Luxury today isn't just about marble and chandeliers—it's about personalization, authenticity, and meaning. Guests want to feel seen. They want experiences that resonate emotionally. And that requires us, as professionals, to be much more intuitive and sensitive. Less robotic, more human.

Do you think Rome is keeping up with this evolution?

Rome is complex. It's rich with history and tradition, and that's a strength—but it can also make innovation a bit slower. That said, I think there's incredible potential here. Rome has everything: art, beauty, culture, food, people. It just needs the right narrative. We need to tell the story of Rome in a new way—one that connects with the future while honoring the past.

Do you have a motto or quote that guides you?

Yes, two: "La semplicità è la suprema sofisticazione." "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." by Leonardo da Vinci. The second one is: "Never stop learning."

Because even now, after so many years, I still feel there's so much to learn. That's what keeps me motivated.