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"Empowered by roots, driven by progress"

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

Interview with Mara Panajia, President & CEO of Henkel Italy

About Mara Panajia:

Mara Panajia has been recognized by **Forbes** among the **100 Successful Italian Women** (2021) and by **Fortune** among the **50 Most Powerful Women** (2023). Her blend of empathy, strategic thinking, and unwavering determination continues to shape Henkel into a company where business results and social responsibility go hand in hand.

Even the most cursory glance at the Henkel Italy website reveals a company which stands out for its forward-thinking initiatives and goals for the near future: electric car charging stations that power vehicles within minutes, ultra-efficient showers that use only a few drops of water, and a corporate structure where women currently make up over 38% of the managerial force. These innovations and commitments are championed by **Mara Panajia**, President and CEO of Henkel Italy.

Beyond the company's technological edge, Henkel supports impactful social programs such as **MasterGenitori**, a training and support initiative for parents, and **DiversaMENTE,** which fosters workforce diversity in age, gender, disability, and sexual orientation.

During our brief but intense interview—punctuated by both tears and laughter—I discovered that Mara Panajia is not only an accomplished and formidable business leader but also a woman of profound depth, humanity, and empathy. Her warmth was evident throughout our conversation, as was the enthusiasm, respect, and affection of her assistant, Giusi Viani, who joined during our conversation.

What follows is an in-depth interview, providing insights into Mara's personal journey, leadership philosophy, and vision for the future.

Can you tell us a bit about your background?

I'm originally from Reggio Calabria, in southern Italy. I grew up in a family environment that fostered my independence and drive, despite the prejudices of the time. When I was younger, I dreamed of becoming a civil engineer, but an uncle advised my father against it because supervising construction sites was seen as

a "male environment." Although it was a stereotypical piece of advice, it came from a place of concern for my well-being.

Eventually, I set aside engineering and reconsidered my passions. Encouraged by my parents and sister, I left Reggio Calabria to attend Bocconi University in Milan. During my second year, I discovered marketing. Interestingly enough, as a child, I was always reading product labels and never missed commercials—without knowing it, I was already fascinated by marketing!

I owe a lot to my parents. My mother was a teacher (as were both of my grandmothers—one of them the first female teacher in the province of Reggio Calabria during World War I), and my father was forward-thinking—he convinced my mother to get a driver's license before they were even married. Coming from the South, having such open-minded parents gave me the strength to overcome obstacles both as a woman and as a professional.

Can you describe your career path and how it led you to your current position?

I've now been working in multinational companies for almost 30 years, and most of this time has been at Henkel—a long story that started back in 2000. After graduating from Bocconi University, my first professional opportunity was an internship at Mazars, a French auditing firm. It wasn't exactly what I'd dreamed of (I wanted to do marketing!), but I saw it as a chance to get my foot in the door. In 1995, I joined Danone in management control. Three years later, I finally made the leap to a marketing role. By 2000, Henkel had offered me a position as Brand Manager for Dixan, marking the beginning of my journey here. I later became Senior Manager for Dixan and then Marketing Director for the entire Laundry division. My ambitions kept growing, and I made this clear to my managers. Together, we planned a path for my professional growth, which included working in Sales before I took on international roles for five years. I returned to Italy in 2019 as General Manager of the Laundry division, and in September 2022, I also became President and CEO of Henkel Italy.

MARA PANAJIA, *President and CEO of Henkel Italy*

How would you describe yourself in three words?

I'm determined and highly results-oriented—but I tend to avoid the term c*ompetitive* because it doesn't carry a positive connotation for me. I'm also both *impassionata* and *appassionata (*that is, deeply passionate) about what I do.
[At this point, Mara's assistant Giusi interjects "May I please intervene to add "energetic," because Mara has a lot of energy and a lot of empathy."

Mara reiterates I do believe empathy—truly connecting with others—is crucial for any leader.

If you could invite three people (from the past, present, or future) to dinner, who would they be, and what would you ask them?

This is a lovely question. I'd definitely start with John F. Kennedy—I've read many books about him, and I admire all that he accomplished. Next, I'd invite [Italian aeronautical engineer and professor] Amalia Ercoli Finzi, an extraordinary woman whom I also find very likable. I'm sure she'd be great fun at a dinner party. If I can indulge myself, I'd also invite Brad Pitt—the one from *Legends of the Fall* and *Meet Joe Black!*

What would you bring to a desert island?

Definitely books! If I have to pick just three, I'd choose ones I've already read and loved. **The Count of Monte Cristo, by Alexandre Dumas** in its original French version (I adore the French language), because I'd finally have the time to enjoy it thoroughly, **Valeria Perrin** and **Joël Dicker** novels—again in French. I've read all his books and love them.

Aside from books, I certainly wouldn't bring exercise equipment—I assume a desert island diet would keep me fit by default! Most importantly, I'd bring my husband, my children, and my friends so we could create a mini-community, throw parties, and sing together.

If you could go back and meet your 15-year-old self, what advice would you give?

I'd tell myself to be more daring—much earlier. To travel more, study more languages. When I was growing up, we didn't have Netflix or YouTube where we could watch shows in the original language, so it felt like a chore. In hindsight, I wish I had insisted on living abroad and learning through real-life experiences sooner—everything I'm now encouraging my own children to do.

I also regret not traveling more with my parents while they were alive. Because they passed away too soon, I don't have as many shared memories as I'd like. This sense of impermanence and urgency drives me now: I try to do as much as possible *together* with my children, to avoid that "sliding doors" feeling of

missed opportunities. People often ask, "How do you do it all?" It's this hunger for life, driven by having seen how short our time can be.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years, and if you had a magic wand, what would you do?

In ten years, I'd love to still be here helping Henkel celebrate its 100th anniversary in Italy (we just marked our 90th!). I really enjoy the business world, and running a company is my dream job. Retirement isn't close yet, so I see myself continuing in a position of responsibility—whether at Henkel or elsewhere, possibly on a broader international level.

As for the "magic wand," I'd love to make the future initiatives on Henkel's agenda a reality—like quickly scaling the sustainability projects we're developing. On a cultural level, I hope that in ten years' time we won't even need to discuss balancing gender representation, because having women equally represented in all functions will be the norm.

You once dreamed of being a civil (social) engineer. How do you feel about that path not coming to fruition?

Honestly, I often say I should thank my uncle—his well-intentioned advice changed my path. I've had a wonderful career I never would have imagined. I met my husband, had children… still, like a "sliding doors" moment, I wonder sometimes: what if I had gone to the United States and worked on community projects or development in Africa?

But in the end, while life took a lot from me, it also gave me so much. Maybe I pursued these gifts with a little extra determination, even anger at times, but I went after them, and I'm happy with where I am now.

What is the most challenging part of your work?

The hardest part is juggling everything. I often feel like a circus performer, keeping many plates spinning at once—balancing corporate responsibilities with my personal life, philanthropy, community initiatives, and so on. We only have 24 hours a day and seven days a week, so something has to give.

Sometimes that means working on weekends; business priorities can't wait. But then I remind myself that my family is also a priority—my husband, my children. Balancing all these spheres is the biggest challenge: figuring out what can be delegated or postponed, and what must be done personally and immediately.

Do you have strategies or resources that help you make these choices and manage your time?

Part of it comes with experience, but it also depends on having a strong team. Giusi, for example, is an enormous support—she helps me prioritize and handle both the practical and emotional sides of my job. I say she helps me with me my head, my heart and my hand. I also lean heavily on my leadership team.

The higher the level you attain, the more you must learn to delegate. You pick the right people and trust them to do their jobs. Some of them are even better than I am at certain tasks! It's important to acknowledge that we can't do it all ourselves. But it's equally important to be present and step in when they need you.

Was it your idea to create the MasterGenitori program? It seems you've built a unique corporate community—rare in the corporate world—and this program feels like another "bridge" you've constructed.

Initially, we had a concept called "Master Mamma," but I was the first to say we needed to move beyond just motherhood and embrace parenthood. I couldn't have accomplished what I have without my husband's support, so I believe strongly that both mothers and fathers should be equally involved. Children aren't just a mother's domain.

Everything we do in this sense—MasterGenitori, DiversaMENTE, and more—stems from this belief that a supportive corporate community benefits everyone.

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

My leadership style has evolved thanks to various cultural and professional experiences. I've realized leadership is more about listening, inspiring, and enabling others than simply giving orders.
I see myself as a facilitator and a sponsor rather than just a mentor. As a sponsor, I actively advocate for my team, ensuring they get the visibility and opportunities they deserve. This shift from directing to empowering—from mentoring to sponsoring—has been pivotal. When leaders move beyond personal achievements to actively nurture others, the entire organization flourishes.

MARA PANAJIA, *President and CEO of Henkel Italy*

What key traits or habits do you believe are essential for effective leadership?

I'd highlight four main things:

1. Empathy and Active Listening: Truly understanding and valuing different perspectives helps build authentic connections and fosters trust.
2. Resilience and Adaptability: In a constantly changing environment, leaders must remain agile and open to new possibilities, turning challenges into growth opportunities.
3. Building Strong Networks: Both inside and outside the company. Collaboration drives innovation. Henkel encourages bridging teams and regions to ensure continuous knowledge exchange.
4. Sponsorship and Support: It's not just about guiding people but also advocating for them, recognizing their strengths, and giving them room to grow.

As our founder Fritz Henkel said in 1916: "We do not want to rest so as not to rust, but to do our utmost to continue to expand the company internally and externally." That spirit of proactive growth and connection remains central to Henkel's culture today.

What role do you believe diversity and inclusion play in the workplace, and how do you foster it?

Diversity is a strategic asset. Henkel employs around 50,000 people worldwide, representing 125 nationalities. Today, about 38% of our managers are women, and our goal is to reach 50%.

But diversity isn't just about gender—it includes age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and more. Research supports this: teams that are balanced perform better in the long run than those skewed heavily one way or another.

To foster diversity and inclusion:

- Hiring Practices: Our shortlists for new hires always include 50% women and 50% men. Ultimately, talent—not gender—prevails in the final selection.
- Commitments: In 2019, we signed Italy's Charter for Equal Opportunities and Equality at Work (Italian Diversity Charter), reinforcing our commitment to creating an inclusive work environment and HR policies free from discrimination.
- Training and Mentoring: We collaborate with Valore D for training on inclusion and host mentoring activities.
- Parental Leave: We recently introduced gender-neutral parental leave globally, offering all parents (regardless of gender or family status) eight weeks of 100% paid leave. In Italy, for fathers or second caregivers, this extends beyond the state-mandated 10 days to a full eight weeks.
- DiversaMENTE Program: A forum for open discussions on ageism, disabilities, women and finance, and more. We believe conversation and first-hand testimonies can change mindsets and break down barriers.

Overall, we aim to make inclusion natural and expected, so that in ten years' time, it won't even be a question worth asking.

How do you want to be remembered? What do you want your legacy to be?

Professionally, I'd love to be remembered as someone who helped bring Henkel Italy to new heights—a place where it's not just about products, but also about the emotions and experiences we offer customers. Equally important is community impact.
Since arriving at Henkel, we've actively supported organizations like Banco Alimentare (food bank), Pizza Out, and Fondazione Veronesi. I'd like people to remember me as someone who married economic success with social responsibility—because for me, a truly complete company also cares about the wider community it serves.

Interview conducted by Danielle DeVine for the Professional Women's Association of Rome (PWA).