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Taking the Wheel

Veronica Johns epitomises the notion of climbing the ranks, going from a PA to president and CEO while never losing touch with the people of Fiat Chrysler Group.

Images by Estelle Judah Photography

When people think of the automotive industry, it becomes clear that it is a male-dominated sector. From an early age, boys admire and play with cars because it's simply what social norms dictate, and as they grow up, that fascination usually stays strong. However, Fiat Chrysler Group has broken away from the stereotype, putting the best person, not 'man', in the role of president and CEO. In May this year, the company announced the appointment of Veronica Johns, the first Australian female to head a car company locally.

Veronica started with the Fiat Chrysler Group 15 years ago as personal assistant to the finance director. She then progressed through the company ranks, shifting from marketing, to dealer development, sales management, and finally director of sales before taking the top seat. Coming up in this unofficial 'boys club', Veronica looks back on her journey and where she wants to take Fiat Chrysler Group in the future.

In working her way up the Fiat Chrysler corporate structure, Veronica learned the importance of

believing in herself and her ability to get the job done. "Not everyone that I work with knew that I started out as a PA, so when I discussed that with the staff in my first general address, they were actually amazed at how it all happened," she recalls. "I think it helped a lot of our team realise that they don't have to come out of university with three degrees and go straight into a manager level in order to work their way up.

"The one thing that I pass on to people when I talk to them about their careers is that I never said no to anything. A lot of Gen Ys these days ask themselves, 'Is this a step forward for me?' and I wasn't like that; I just wanted to learn as much as I could and do a great job. It's helped me because I've had eight different roles in 15 years, so essentially a new job each time. That's the one thing that I try to share with people. If you're in sales and you want to be a regional manager or director of sales, start believing and acting like you are now; don't get the job and then start acting like it. And be really careful when you say no to opportunities, whether you think they're right at the time or not, because it's rare they'll come up again."

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- Veronica Johns

Veronica encourages women to take a bigger role in traditional corporate structures and not let gender get in the way of performance, particularly since the auto industry is so male dominated. "The one thing that shouldn't start happening is big jobs going to females because companies need to get their numbers up and gender ratios right," she notes. "People should be awarded jobs because they're the best person for the role. In industries that are male dominated, I believe it takes a special type of personality to break through it. Indeed, having a thick skin certainly helps, and that could be a reason why some women in such industries don't appear in senior management roles all too regularly."

It takes certain strengths and characteristics in women to deal with the glass ceiling in business. "I can only comment on what has worked for me, and that has included being open, honest, and transparent with everyone that I've dealt with," Veronica highlights. "The dealer network can make or break you. We've only got two female dealer principals in our group of nearly 100 dealers, which is most certainly not a lot. But >



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regardless of gender, everyone appreciates honesty, and if they think you're doing the best for them, then they'll put every bit of faith in you. That's really the reputation I built for myself in the field."

Veronica notes the importance of communication between her branch and the Fiat Chrysler parent company. "We have one official video conference a week, and we have phone calls throughout the week, so they're very supportive," she explains. "In my interview, I was advised that there were people from all around the world, both male and female, who had their hand up for this role. As such, it's clear that the global company is not afraid of women in the organisation and they're very supportive of promoting from within. For Fiat Chrysler Group, it's all about developing people within our organisation, investing in them, and seeing them grow."

As CEO, Veronica regards her dealer network as her major supplier, while her team of directors maintain relationships with external suppliers. "The key focus for my role specifically is the partnership with our dealers," she says. "That's who I invest in and who invests in us. Engagement is critical to the ongoing success of any organisation and has been a key focus for us, both internally and externally. Open communication is imperative to an engaged relationship with our franchisees; and while I'm not in the field as often as I have been previously, I still try to get out there as often as possible."

"Our senior management team also carry out quarterly roadshows on a national scale, so I normally try to attend those. While I have moved out of my sales-director function to focus on the business holistically, there will never be a point when I'm not communicating with our dealers. My roots in the automotive industry, specifically the past eight years, have been founded in dealer relationship development



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and management, and that won't be changing any time soon!"

The most important value in Fiat Chrysler is employee engagement, according to Veronica. She recently went to the staff body to set up a committee that would outline the organisation's internal values and was surprised at the level of investment people had made in the company. "Ten people formed the committee," she explains. "Some of the statements they put forward had so much passion for these brands and this organisation. It was unbelievable. I'm not about looking to the management team for all the answers; I believe that everyone inside these four walls is authorised to put their voice forward on how they want to see something work out for them."

"One of the team members that presented to the staff recently said, 'There are moments in your life that will change you forever. Being part of this selection committee has changed the way I look at my future in this company for the rest of my life.' That was an amazing thing. While I'm realistic in that I don't necessarily assume that all the people we develop are going to stay with us forever, I want to be



able to invest in them and make them better themselves for the next opportunity that comes their way, because they'll always remember the experience they had with us, and I certainly want it to be a positive one."

Veronica believes Fiat Chrysler in Australia has an exciting future. "We started the second phase of our new journey last year when we took over the distributorship of the Fiat and Alfa Romeo brands, so we're still very much in a growth phase," she concludes.

"Put simply, we've got to be the best manufacturer in the market and just keep pushing forward. I believe internal and external engagement, coupled with a strong customer focus, is just the recipe to get us there." •