

# Dawn Marriott

Partner and Serial Chair at Hg



## Dawn Marriott talks to Jane Wakefield about the importance of failing fast, the impact of mentoring and why she keeps a weighted hula-hoop in her office.

The first thing I notice about Dawn is that she is standing up – and she remains standing for the entirety of our 45-minute chat – a first for me in any interview I've conducted for Boardwave. Dawn explains that she isn't a sitter: "I don't even have a chair. My desk isn't one that moves up and down, I deliberately made it to be tall". And that wasn't the only unconventional aspect of our meeting. Towards the end of our discussion, as we talk less about business and more about hobbies, she starts hula-hooping. "It's legendary at work," she says, "I ask my team if they mind me hula-hooping while we talk. At first, they said it was distracting but now they don't care," she laughs. The hula-hoop is both a way to keep fit and keep calm. It is clear that Dawn Marriott lives life in the fast lane – and I'm not talking about material possessions such as boats and cars (though she has plenty of those too). I am talking about pace.

Dawn has run countless businesses during her career: First at the business process outsourcing firm Capita and now as a partner and portfolio CEO at private equity company Hg. And she has learnt a lot of lessons along the way – the most important being the need for good mentors.

Aged 16, Dawn decided that she didn't want to study for A-levels or go to university. She wanted to get on the career ladder—and she wanted to do it as quickly as possible. She responded to an advert for a job at private healthcare provider, BUPA. "They didn't normally employ school leavers, but I chatted my way through the telephone screening interview without even realising it was an interview. When they said I wasn't old

enough for the job I thought, okay, it doesn't matter because I was just happy to have had an interview."

She must have made a strong impression because they called her back and offered her a job. Initially she worked as a sales assistant but she was quickly promoted. Dawn tells me that the three years she spent at BUPA were "probably the most impactful of [her] career". This was, in large part, down to her boss. "She was an amazing lady. She took me under her wing and taught me all about business, how to have influence, how to get things done and how to be with customers," Dawn says. "It was about putting customers first, having good empathy, being very honest and straightforward...and working very hard."

The other key mentor in her life was Paul Pindar, the then COO and later CEO of Capita, a company she was headhunted for a few years later and remained at for almost 20 years. "He approached me to come and run the sales team. I accepted the job because I liked him. Everything I put into what I do today is because of those two role models, and the learnings and the opportunities that they gave me."

Mentorship remains hugely important to Dawn. Today, she mentors 50 people across multiple business – including some from within the Boardwave community. "I feel a real sense of worth when I find someone who wants to be mentored and who I can genuinely help in a productive way," she

says. And she has lots of experience to share. Dawn became a CEO in her early 20s and admits that she made loads of mistakes back in the early days. "I was far too lenient. I trusted everyone and I didn't measure enough things – I was more face-value. Now I measure everything." She describes earning both her 'scars and stripes' during her long tenure at Capita.

Chief amongst her learnings was not failing fast enough. "In the past I would always try to fix someone but, in reality, they

may be a great person in the wrong job. Sometimes that can be a personal fit problem but more often it's a skills and competency issue. As a company scales and grows, not all the people can grow and innovate at the same rate."

She has been the CEO or Chair of a range of firms, from a pharma tech business to accountancy and geo-spatial software. She doesn't mess

about when she is appointed. "I went into this pharma tech business that was failing and after one day I knew I could fix it," she explains. By the end of the first week she had agreed with the founder that he would leave the board. The CEO was also dismissed.

"It was a highly scientific environment, but I didn't need the subject knowledge. I was able to see that they had some wrong people, some right people who were hidden, and they needed commercial help to understand the numbers that were running their business." She admits that she has become good at letting people go if they



***I feel a real sense of worth when I find someone who wants to be mentored and who I can genuinely help in a productive way"***

# Leaders lives

aren't right for the team. "It makes me sound terrible!"

The truth is that she inspires loyalty in those she works with. "Since I left Capita, I've had around 200 of my old colleagues come and work on projects that I'm connected with. That's because if you treat people well and respectfully, and you look after the whole person, not just the employee, that loyalty and trust creates a bond that never goes away. I'd like to think that people who know me would say 'Dawn works incredibly hard but she's a nice person to work with'."

The 'working incredibly hard' part seems like an understatement; it will come as no surprise that Dawn is a self-confessed workaholic. I ask her to describe a typical day and she says it begins at 5.30am with a swim in her home pool, followed by back-to-back meetings. On the day that we speak, those meetings finish at 8pm. Afterwards, she has a parents' evening appointment for her 14-year-old daughter. Though she does allow herself Saturdays off, Sundays are all about home admin. Dawn remains proud that she didn't go to university, and laughs about how she was once asked if she went to Oxford or Cambridge. "I'm the only person in the entire

office who didn't go to university, including the PA and the guys who run the kitchen."

Dawn grew up in a working-class family in Birmingham and always craved independence. At BUPA, Dawn saved enough money to buy a one-bedroom house and found herself playing host to her friends who were all studying for their A-levels. "They used to come around to my little house and do their homework. Looking back now, I think that was so crazy. What kind of teenager must I have been to have that level of dedication, focus and commitment?" She tells me she was compliant and hard-working at school. But she also learnt early on that "you've got to fight for yourself. No one else is going to look after you".

Dawn has become very used to doing things her own way. She even points out that her curly corkscrew hair is 'more rock chick than business executive'. "I don't try to change to fit in. I am always completely myself. I'm very confident and communicative about what I can do and what I'm good at. But I'm equally confident and communicative about what is not my area of expertise. It's about understanding your own strengths and limitations and making sure that the team around you is supplemented, so

## **What piece of tech (other than your phone) could you not be without?**

*My reMarkable (an electronic notebook).*

## **If you hadn't become a CEO, what would you have done?**

*Probably a musician. Music was very important to me growing up.*

## **What are your top 3 tips for business success?**

- *Get some good mentors.*
- *Know your strengths and limitations and build a diverse team, not just in gender but in experience, competence and economic background.*
- *Work bloody hard and take some educated risks.*

you don't over-index on people that have the same strengths as you. Otherwise, you end up clashing with them."

Despite her workaholic and perfectionist personality, Dawn has never considered starting her own company. "It has never appealed to me. I like things that already exist which I can improve or grow."

It comes as no surprise that she is a fan of another serial-business person and workaholic: Elon Musk. In fact, she recently finished the billionaire's biography. "I think he is a complex individual and he has a lot of characteristics that mean I wouldn't enjoy spending time with him. But, I thoroughly admire his innovation and his ability to create a following, his willingness to take risks and to back himself."

With children in their teens and twenties, Dawn's personal life is as busy as her business one. She is a keen swimmer and

she took up cross-country skiing at the age of 48. She is also a talented musician who can play the violin, flute, the bugle, drums, recorder and clarinet.

As she says: "I put pressure on myself to be the best version of myself and put 110 per cent into everything I do."

We finished the interview ahead of schedule and she is pleased by our efficiency. I let her go because she probably has 17 more meetings to fit in today. And I'm sure that at

least one of them will involve hula-hooping.

“

***I am always completely myself. I'm very confident and communicative about what I can do and what I'm good at. But I'm equally confident and communicative about what is not my area of expertise"***

