



Denmark's Minister of Science

Charlotte Sahl-Madsen is all business—and means business

WHEN CHARLOTTE SAHL-MADSEN became Denmark's Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation in February 2010, she brought no formal political experience to the job. She was not even an official Conservative party member until the day before her appointment. She admits that when she was offered her the position, it was "the biggest surprise ever."

Sahl-Madsen was chosen for her two decades of business experience and board memberships including the National Centre for Education in Nature, Technology and Health, and the innovation unit of the Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs. She urges science students to "Get an education!", although she is largely self-taught. The daughter of a self-employed businessman and a hatmaker, her only official degree is from Holstebro Gymnasium in western Denmark. But in less than 20 years, she went from director of the Ebeltoft Glass Museum near Aarhus, to Head of R&D at LEGO, to executive positions at Danfoss Universe, to the ministry.

A story of coincidence and trust

Sahl-Madsen says her career path wasn't

planned, but is "a story of coincidence and trust"—being in the right place at the right time with the right skills, and gaining and earning confidence. "When I was asked to be director of Ebeltoft Glass Museum," she says, "I wasn't an artist and didn't have a university degree, but the management had faith that I could make the museum a success. Being a shy girl from west Jutland I said, 'No, I'm not qualified!' But I'm raised to believe that if people show trust in you, you'd better convince them they were right." Through the museum's network of sponsors and political contacts, Sahl-Madsen met people who recognized her potential. A funding application to the LEGO Foundation brought the CEO to the museum. "I thought he was going to come with a grant," says Sahl-Madsen. "I gave him a guided tour and we went to my office and he said, 'I'm here to ask you if you would like to head R&D at LEGO'". From LEGO, Sahl-Madsen was headhunted to be CEO of Danfoss Universe. She has served on government boards for tourism, arts, and science since the 1990s, but says, "I'd never thought that one day I should be a minister. But I'm very proud to be asked, and humbled, because it's a challenging and important task."

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Michael Sølvsten, current CEO of Danfoss Universe, met Sahl-Madsen in 2005. He portrays the minister as driven and persevering. "When she has a goal she pursues it," he says. "Charlotte Sahl-Madsen shows that if you believe in something, and want to get it, you can." He thought she might have a hard time adapting to the political world, but having seen her in action in her first year, Sølvsten says, "She's like a fish in water." He adds, "She's very dedicated to getting young persons interested in natural science."

Promoting science education is a high priority for Sahl-Madsen, but much of her opposition comes from academia. She has faced complaints about budget cuts to universities and research programs, and her message that the Danish government is keeping its commitment of one percent of gross national product to fund research and innovation is answered by frustrated university administrators who point out that this means less actual funding in a slow economy. The tough job market has driven a 10% increase in student admissions applications, especially in natural sciences, putting even more strain on the universities. Sahl-Madsen firmly promotes study abroad, and educators agree in principle, but oppose enforced international studies.

In autumn 2010, Sahl-Madsen began touring eight Danish universities for discussions with students and staff on increasing educational quality, internationalization and social contribution. "Every graduate must develop a cultural understanding and curiosity and see the opportunities in globalization," she says. Sahl-Madsen sees the international network of Danish researchers as a tremendous resource for collaboration and inspiration for students and faculty. To cultivate social responsibility, Sahl-Madsen wants students to gain an "entrepreneurial mindset", and use their university education and experience to address social challenges, as well as for personal benefit.

Connecting research and business

Sahl-Madsen's positive attitude about the intersection of globalization, academics and the marketplace shows how her business background infuses her policies. She sees her perspective as an advantage: a pragmatic point-of-view that looks for ways that educational and research institutions can work with private foundations and the private sector to meet society's demand for innovations and well-educated people. Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen has said, "She knows how to connect research and business," although this be why the academic world is wary.

Rector Ralf Hemmingsen of the University of Copenhagen has been one of the voices reminding Danish politicians of the importance of research without industry connections, stating, "Basic research is the foundation of our future. And with her background in the private business sector, I assume [Sahl-Madsen] understands that the cost of development and quality is the same in academia."

When it comes to these types of policy disputes, Sahl-Madsen says bring it on. "I like that we have this public debate about the role of the universities, the balance between education and research, and basic and strategic research," she says. "It's completely fair that I have to come up with arguments and explanations for my decisions." Answering to constituents is new for Sahl-Madsen, but translating research into business, and technology into social benefit is a long-standing goal. "I don't have a work-life balance issue," she says. "because I enjoy the challenges that I'm facing. I want to make things a little better tomorrow than they were yesterday and leave the world in better condition than we receive it. Being a minister means you can make that difference." ◊

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CHARLOTTE SAHL-MADSEN

Born: 1964 in Holstebro, Denmark

Career:

1983 Diploma, Holstebro Gymnasium
1985 Law classes, University of Aarhus
1987 Managing Director of Events, Herning Museum of Contemporary Art
1990 Executive Director, Ebeltoft Glass Museum
2000 Business classes, Harvard University and others
2000 Head of R&D, LEGO
2002 Head of LEGO VisionLab
2004 CEO Danfoss Universe science theme park
2009 Chair, Danfoss Universe and President, Universe Foundation
2010 Danish Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation
Currently: unmarried, no children



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Charlotte Dyring CEO
ExpreS2ion Biotechnologies.
www.expres2ionbio.com
cd@expres2ionbio.com
tel: +45 5090 0403