

We are ETH: Margherita Fontana

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[00:00:16] **Susan Kish:** In this episode, I'm talking to ETH alumna, chemist and woman leader, Margarita Fontana.

[00:00:22] She is global procurement director of strategic planning and governance at Dow Chemical and has a PhD in material science from the ETH. She shares with us how ETH Zurich influenced her and continues to be important for her today. I'm Susan Kish, host of the, We are ETH podcast, telling the story of the alumni and friends of the ETH Zurich, the Swiss federal Institute of technology based in Zurich. ETH regularly ranks amongst the top universities in the world with cutting edge research, science and people. The people who were there, the people who are there and the people who will be there. These are their stories.

[00:01:07] Margherita welcome.

[00:01:09] **Margherita Fontana:** Hi, Susan. Nice to be here with you.

[00:01:11] **Susan Kish:** So let's start at the very beginning. It sounds like you grew up in Sicily, near Palermo. Is that right?

[00:01:17] **Margherita Fontana:** Yes. South of Palermo, Southwest. Uh, there is where I was born and raised and where I went to university. And then at a certain point, I think it was the third year of university. Um, that city although it is a big city and it's a big university, it felt like a bit too small. So I was curious to know how my fellow students in Europe were doing and what, what were they studying, how they're studying. So that was the point where I just left the island and left the family and went to the Netherlands to discover new fellow students. And that was really a fantastic opportunity. It was my first truly international experience.

[00:01:56] **Susan Kish:** But then how did you get from the Netherlands to Switzerland? And to the ETH,

[00:02:01] **Margherita Fontana:** Uh, the reason why I, uh, I came to the ETH, just because of that very first experience of going to Leiden, Leiden university, where I did my master's thesis. And once I finished the Master thesis, I was offered the opportunity to, uh, to join the industry.

[00:02:17] But back then, I didn't feel ready. I was like, you know, I just feel the strong need of learning. And I was curious about doing research and doing research in the polymer technology space and the material science space space. So I was "netscaping", it was 97. I was learning to use the internet web search and use Netscape for those who remember Netscape.

[00:02:40] **Susan Kish:** I remember that

[00:02:41] **Margherita Fontana:** I was typing polymer research, uh, polymer technology research, and the first two hits were one from ETH and the second from university of Grenoble. So I wrote both professors. Uh, who turns out to be friends by the way. Good friends. And, uh, I engage in a conversation with Paul Smith who was leading the polymer technology group here, at the ETH who, um, invited me to just come over and have a conversation.

[00:03:10] **Susan Kish:** So you got on a plane down to Zurich, and you said you discovered the town, you looked at the view. You said, this is the place for me?

[00:03:18] **Margherita Fontana:** Pretty much. So actually it was Paul Smith who invited me. And I came here with all, uh, um, ideas of which field I wanted to research and, uh, took the first plane from Amsterdam to Zurich.

[00:03:31] We had a coffee, quick chat and then he told me, you know, go downtown. See whether you'd like this city. And if you like the city you can come back and we talk about research, but if you don't like the city, that's fine. We will talk about research, but from a distance. Okay. That sounds like it's an interesting person and team to hangout with.

[00:03:52] **Susan Kish:** So you walked down to the main, the main train station and then just walked through the city?

[00:03:58] **Margherita Fontana:** I walked down from central all the way to Bellevue and guess what... It was a June morning, sunny, beautiful day. And I fell in love with the city. So I was like, if that's the first part of the test, I think I, I made it. So I went back.

[00:04:12] I told Paul if it is for the city, I'm all in. Um, and then we went for lunch and then we started talking about research.

[00:04:21] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. That is a great story. And then after you went to the ETH, you did your, you got a PhD. How long did it take you?

[00:04:31] **Margherita Fontana:** It was almost four years and one patent because we had to publish a patent, uh, demonstrating that the research we were doing, it was actually something that we could apply um, which was really very interesting. It wasn't, it was not an easy ride, but it was a fantastic one. So, um, it was, it's been an experience that prepared me for the corporate world. Although back then, I could not recognize that, but it was a lot on learning, uh, on how to manage a project, how to deal with an internal team how to lead within that team. And I, and the outcome was a wonderful one. It was really one that prepared me for even the job I'm doing today.

[00:05:13] **Susan Kish:** And what was the topic of your thesis? Just as a side note?

[00:05:17] **Margherita Fontana:** Yeah, it was semi-conducting materials, but not conventional ones. Semi-conducting materials are based on silicone material. And we were trying to do something which was a bit hybrid. We had an organic part and inorganic parts. So with unconventional precious metals, I was working with platinum very, very novel.

[00:05:37] **Susan Kish:** So after you completed your doctorate and got your PhD, if I understand correctly, then you decided to get an MBA.

[00:05:44] **Margherita Fontana:** Uh, yeah, there was quite some years of experience in between. I went to the industry because back then I felt ready to work in the industry. So I worked for six years, uh, in the industry, first thing with a technical job, but really leading a, an advanced materials lab where we were lucky enough, I was continuing a bit of the research that I was doing at the ETH. That was my entry point into the corporate world. And then I moved more towards the innovation management and new new ventures. So really still working in the innovation space, but more from a managerial angle. And then I decided, okay, I am ready to continue learning. Um, I was ready to move on, do a different job, but I did not feel equipped to move more towards the commercial side of, of the, of the house. So to say, yeah. And then I pursued the MBA at, uh, INSEAD, which has been another life-changing experience.

[00:06:39] **Susan Kish:** I can imagine. And it sounds like you had to make that decision right in the midst of the financial crisis.

[00:06:45] **Margherita Fontana:** It was exactly on the 15th of September, 2008, the day Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy. Yeah.

[00:06:54] And, um, you know, back then I had to go to my second level, it was the CTO of the company, to convince him, to endorse me the time to go back to school. And obviously the reaction of the person who, by the way, he's an ETH alumni told me why? Why do you want to go back to, to school? We were in the middle of an acquisition of our company by a bigger company.

[00:07:20] And they told me just stay put, see what happens. And then we take it from there. And I told him, Martin, I actually just because all these things are happening at the same time, I really feel the urge to go back to school. And, um, he supported me. One week later, I was on a train to Paris.

[00:07:38] **Susan Kish:** Fantastic. And INSEAD is such a well-renowned and well-regarded school for an MBA. What was the difference? What were the key differences between getting your MBA at the INSEAD and during that PhD of the ETH, how would you summarize sort of the top differences between those institutions and those kinds of programs?

[00:07:59] **Margherita Fontana:** I think coming to ETH was really coming to a school of a different level.

[00:08:03] So you, you have to develop, um, the competencies, but also the discipline of delivering on your Monday to which for me was my PhD. Right? With, with all the project work, with all the complexity, uh, to manage. That equipped me to go to INSEAD. When I reached INSEAD, although when I arrived, I thought it was like the person with the least experience and the least to offer to the audience.

[00:08:27] I felt very, very small among the crowd. I just realized that actually what the ETH has given me, it was something of a unique value proposition. Then many of my fellows at INSEAD, they did not have actually, I was the, among the only two student with a PhD from a technical school. So it turned out that I probably without ETH, I would not have been very well equipped to go to INSEAD.

[00:08:51] **Susan Kish:** So you're able to hold your own with the bankers and the McKinsey consultants. And the other peers within those classes?

[00:08:59] **Margherita Fontana:** Yes, not on day one because on day one I did not feel the confidence, but day two, I was on my feet. Yeah.

[00:09:04] **Susan Kish:** That's a quick recovery. Back in the day, you used to have to fill in those forms when you fly into London, that said, what is your profession? What would you have filled in? Are you a chemist? Are you a material scientist? Are you an innovator? What do you fill in today?

[00:09:28] **Margherita Fontana:** You know, I still, today I am a chemist. I'm a chemist. And for me that means experimenting the means, researching the means, learning and discovering. So I heard that you want to put a label. I'm a chemist, I'm a scientist at heart.

[00:09:41] **Susan Kish:** Very cool. One of the things that I noticed in your work at Dow, which is where you are, your day job now, is you're involved in areas such as the women's inclusion network. Can you talk about how you got engaged with that and what it's about.

[00:09:58] **Margherita Fontana:** It's, it's, it's a global employee network, um, which is one of the biggest for the company, probably one of the oldest. And with the mission of creating equality, driving equality from the shop floor, all the way to the boardroom. The reason why I got involved is it's a very simple one. When I joined Dow, I didn't feel included at first, although I was coming in with a PhD into a company. A polymer science and material science company.

[00:10:25] People were reminding me that I was a newcomer and probably I will not last long in the company. There was like more than 12 years ago. And I thought you know what? I have a choice. Either I prove everyone wrong, or I leave. So before I leave, let me try to see whether I can prove everyone around me wrong and I actually did. And that's the reason why I'm still with Dow. Cause I started driving the changes from my chair, from where I was sitting. Start engaging in conversation, raising awareness about what the real issue was and what the great opportunity a business opportunity ahead of us was. And now I can proudly say that – now it's mainstream, but back then was not mainstream. And, um, there's been a fantastic, uh, leadership development opportunity next to all the jobs that I have done that I can only recommend everybody to step in and embrace.

[00:11:18] **Susan Kish:** What do you see as the big differences that you've seen at Dow over those 12 years, as regard to this question of the role of women and inclusion.

[00:11:27] **Margherita Fontana:** Well, first and foremost, the tone of the engagement starting from, from the top and percolating down throughout the organization. And now moving towards one of the hardest core for the company I believe of any manufacturing company, which is really the manufacturing and operation parts of the organization, where oh really by, by default, people are not engaged as in other parts of the organization, because it's easy to communicate when people are behind the screen or within the same office. But when you have to explain equality and inclusion to shift workers, it requires a bit more of a reach out and creativity, so that engagement, but the awareness that we have to be a company that allows everyone to feel included and feel themselves. It's a completely different culture shift I would say mindset shift versus 12 years ago.

[00:12:24] **Susan Kish:** I'm going to bring this back to your time at ETH. Where there a lot of women in chemistry and material science when you were there, was this a question at that time? That would be what, 99, 1999 when you started?

[00:12:36] **Margherita Fontana:** I wish, I mean, I wish having been involved in Dow has actually been also like an opportunity to look myself in the mirror, thinking back where I started. I mean, when I started to study chemistry in Italy in Palermo, we were only six women in a class of 95 students. And then the ETH was not much different have to say, and I wish back then I could have more women role more around me to look up to.

[00:13:08] I mean, there were quite a few, but not as many as I wished I can say now.

[00:13:13] **Susan Kish:** Let's talk about what your day job is. I understand you're responsible for strategic sourcing and procurement to pay across E M E A I, which I have to say I don't, I don't recognize that abbreviation. EMEA is Europe, Middle east, Africa. So what's the I?

[00:13:31] **Margherita Fontana:** India.

[00:13:32] **Susan Kish:** India ah. So what is that job?

[00:13:36] **Margherita Fontana:** So I have a dual role. I mean, first and foremost, I was, this is probably the first job I never actively seeked or applied for. The first job I was asked and proposed to step into.

[00:13:48] **Susan Kish:** That's cool.

[00:13:50] **Margherita Fontana:** It's this fantastic opportunity because procurement was never on my radar screen.

[00:13:56] I worked in the technical job, marketing, sales, um, and the procurement was like, okay, yeah, I know what it is, but it's not where I want to be. And I have to say having been given the opportunity ahead of the pandemic, but then effectively doing the job during the pandemic has been one of the best learning opportunity within the corporation to date.

[00:14:18] Why was I offered the opportunity? Uh, first and foremost to drive change, a change in the procurement organization, the way we work, in the way we add a new capability from sustainability to risk management, to market intelligence, data analytics, and these are all topics obviously with the pandemic and the supply chain shortages and difficulties became very hot topic, but we had already a plan before that we dive into and we are learning and developing and changing the organization through those, um, different areas so we speak.

[00:14:54] My assignment was really that to drive big change. And I have to say that it's not been easy, but it's been fantastic in terms of a journey in these two last years.

[00:15:07] **Susan Kish:** In terms of challenges, I would assume questions around diversity and inclusion come up. But I would also assume questions around climate and circularity, those issues must also come up. What are the, what are the big challenges you're looking at?

[00:15:22] **Margherita Fontana:** Dow is an organization that has made bold commitment to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, but already by 2030, we have some ambition goals of reduction of our carbon footprint, but Dow had already in year 2000 laid out the 2015, 2020 sustainability goals.

[00:15:41] So we live and breathe sustainability because it's our license to operate. And because it's the right thing to do for the world we live in from a supply chain, point of view, we are driving and writing the book of scope three, which means not only we, but we with all our suppliers and partners are working daily in setting up target and devising strategy on how to reduce the carbon footprint. Whenever we move any products around the world, that requires a lot of collaboration, a lot of relationship building, a lot of sharing beyond the walls of our own corporations. Um, but one of the key goal is that of driving the scope three carbon footprint reduction for the entire supply chain and logistics organization. Not only ours, but also those of our suppliers.

[00:16:33] **Susan Kish:** Scope three is really tough. But perhaps could you just define for all of our listeners, what is scope one, scope two and what is scope three. Just so we're all looking at it the same way.

[00:16:45] **Margherita Fontana:** Scope one is really targeting, reducing the carbon footprint of the manufacturing um, the operation that each company has. Scope two looks after how do we do that with our customers and scope three is how do you look at the backend of, from an E to E perspective, from an end to end perspective, how do you make sure that throughout the value chain, uh, which we operate with, drive for neutrality, and the lower you go in the scope, if you want scope one scope two is within the fence or where you operate as a company. Scope three is well beyond and touches everything that an organization is exposed to from an operational point of view, outside the fence of the playground where the company operates.

[00:17:30] **Susan Kish:** That sounds like exploding complexity.

[00:17:33] **Margherita Fontana:** Yes it is.

[00:17:38] **Susan Kish:** In your posting for the ETH circle, you wrote about five principles that I thought really resonated. Believe in yourself, your vision, your dream. Never settle for the obvious or the easy choice, growth and opportunity do not arise out of comfortable situations or get out of that comfort zone. Be ready to explore less obvious paths and have the courage to embrace uncertainty.

[00:18:05] I thought these were just fabulous ideas and principles and just wondered, how did you, how did you come up to articulate them?

[00:18:14] **Margherita Fontana:** I did not come up with a principle, looking back at what I've done so far, I think this has been a pattern in my life if you want, because every time I change a job, take a decision or move somewhere, I realized that I was always open to the unknown and actually unknown was very, very compelling to me. And that's why driving change of being in an environment that changes constantly is what makes me thrive. What it means, it means that, you know, it allows in time in tough times in times of crisis, it allows to develop maybe resilience.

[00:18:47] A key skill to, to continue to allow people to thrive. And I have to say during this last two years of the pandemic, it has been proven quite, quite helpful as a skillset that I had developed consciously or unconsciously throughout my life and my, and my career. And I think, you know, we probably

never stop developing this skill of being resilient, but we have to actually be ready for it because it doesn't come for free.

[00:19:16] It comes only if we can embrace that uncertainty and not fighting it, but really learn how to cope with it. But for me, it's exciting. It's... what is frightening for other people in time of uncertainty for me, is exciting.

[00:19:34] **Susan Kish:** That, um, the concept of resilience does seem to have a lot of resonance, especially in these last few years.

[00:19:42] If you were to speak with young women who are just at that stage, you were, when you were at the university of Palermo and thinking about what to do next, what would be your advice? If someone, a young woman was considering pursuing a career in Stem today?

[00:19:59] **Margherita Fontana:** First and foremost, I'll be very happy to meet girls that want to go into Stem.

[00:20:05] I'm a strong advocate of their choice. I will only encourage to, um, to embrace it to, to step in, diving, go somewhere else where they, uh, they are familiar with because that opens up their mind. But I would say follow always your instinct. That's what helped me a lot, your wishes obviously, but your, your instinct then your wishes are very well connected, but be curious, be curious and be open.

[00:20:31] I found myself, you know, all the choices I've made in life is because I wanted them because I seeked them. It's not because somebody told me I should do it. I've actually been doing quite the opposite of what people have recommended, which has turned out to be okay for me. But I will say, you know, Uh, explore, be ready to explore, don't be afraid about exploring. And one thing which I think I did not do enough of at the beginning, ask for help.

[00:20:57] Don't pretend that you have to do it all on your own. It's okay to ask for it. It's actually helpful. It's useful.

[00:21:06] **Susan Kish:** And when you look back and these concept of having the courage to ask for it, the courage to look at this uncertainty, how does ETH play a role in what you do today?

[00:21:19] **Margherita Fontana:** ETH has given me a such solid ground.

[00:21:21] Um, I think I realized it when I left ETH. While I was at ETH, I was constantly challenged in a good way and felt unsettling, but once I left ETH and entered the corporate world, only then I realized how much of a solid, uh, luggage or a solid ground ETH has actually given me and maybe that's natural, I don't know if that's the case for everyone, but at least there was for me and maybe it was also no me realizing it, but people are pointing that out.

[00:21:57] It gave me a methodology on how to approach complexity to how simplifying complexity. I mean, this has been extremely helpful in all the jobs I've done. There is a lot of complexity out there. And if there's one thing that ETH teaches you and gives you the, the opportunity to learn is really how to rationalize approach problems, trying to simplify them, and then, uh, thrive for, for a collaborative solution for it.

[00:22:25] **Susan Kish:** That's very powerful. Having walked down along the Limmat on that day in June in whatever, 1999, what is your favorite place today to have a cup of coffee in Zurich?

[00:22:37] **Margherita Fontana:** It's the, uh, the cafe Odeon, it was the end of that walk. There's actually where I stopped, I had a coffee and I was like, wow, that's nice.

[00:22:48] **Susan Kish:** And when you were a little girl growing up in Sicily, what was it you wanted to do?

[00:22:53] **Margherita Fontana:** I wanted to be able to have to see the world and to have friends everywhere in the world. That was my dream. And there was another idea back in my head that I wanted to become a doctor. But back then it was a medical doctor. Growing up realizing that there was not for me at all, I became a doctor of different kinds that worked out and, uh, I can proudly say, and happily say that I have friends in quite a few countries in the world.

[00:23:20] So to date, I can say that I have reached the wishes or the dreams that they had as a small child. And I'm very happy about that.

[00:23:28] **Susan Kish:** That is just wonderful. Thank you, Margherita. Thank you for your conversation and thank you for your insights.

[00:23:35] **Margherita Fontana:** Thank you, Susan

[00:23:38] **Susan Kish:** I'm Susan Kish host the We are ETH podcast series.

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