

“I knew this job wouldn’t be a walk in the park.”

Dr. Christine Hohmann-Dennhardt set out at the beginning of 2016 to reorganize the areas of legal affairs and compliance. Her primary responsibility is to ensure that in the future the company not only adheres to the letter of the law, but also does the right thing. She is leaving no stone unturned, but can’t yet make a final judgement.

Interview ___ Sepideh Honarbacht Photos ___ Ériver Hijano

Dr. Hohmann-Dennhardt, you assumed the Integrity and Legal Affairs board function at a turbulent time. How did the company convince you to take the job?

I was certainly surprised when they asked me. And I didn’t accept the position right away. But then I thought, if they trust me to help get a company back on track that’s so important for the automotive industry and job security in Germany, then I want to do it. What ultimately convinced me was a long talk with Matthias Müller. I had the feeling that he was really serious about getting to the bottom of things and changing the company.

Do you remember his words?

Something he said that I really liked was: “I can only do this in a team with people I trust, people who support me and will join me on this road.”

Did you ever suspect that by hiring a woman with your resume and reputation, Volkswagen was simply seeking to look good?

That isn’t so important to me. It’s much more important that I stay true to myself. And I had the impression I could do that at this company.

Compliance and integrity – how do they relate to each other?

They complement each other. Compliance means following the rules, and is the basis for the safe, stable business that brings a company long-term success. But as former Federal President Christian Wulff once said, “Not everything that is legal is also right.” Integrity means doing what’s right. It means acting according to standards, guided not just by my own interests or those of the company, but also by a sense of responsibility to the people I’ve been put in charge of and to the common good.

According to your definition, does the team that you work with today have integrity?

I would answer in the affirmative, and not just for my board colleagues. It’s something that I assume of everyone in

The specialist for missions impossible

On January 1, 2016, the Supervisory Board of Volkswagen AG appointed Dr. Christine Hohmann-Dennhardt, 66, to the Board of Management. The first woman on the board, she is responsible for the newly created function of Integrity and Legal Affairs. She held the same position on the board of Daimler AG from 2011 through 2015. Among other positions, Hohmann-Dennhardt, who has a PhD in law, previously served as Minister of Justice of the State of Hesse and as a judge on the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany.

the company unless proven otherwise. But integrity in a company requires a shared canon of values that’s known to all. Otherwise, people become unsure and don’t know what’s expected of them. If business success is set above all else, we lose sight of other goals. But decency and integrity are prerequisites for sustained business success. If that isn’t clear, people can lose their orientation and go in the wrong direction. But that doesn’t mean everything is bad.

What were the underlying conditions that made the manipulation possible?

I can’t presume to give a final judgment yet. In the audit, we took a very close look at the company departments and processes, especially product safety. Compliance and Legal Affairs are examining whether procedures were transparent and clearly understandable. It may be that we need triple checks instead of double checks. There are also factors that favored improper behavior or at least made it harder to expose. The hierarchical structures in the company are part of that. And there obviously weren’t sufficiently clear signals that the Group doesn’t tolerate violations of the law.

What have you done to prevent things like this from happening in the future?

We’ve developed new guidelines, made changes to our organization in Compli-



ance, and improved communication and training. In particular, we want to offer employees more support in difficult situations down the road. We've intensified our monitoring, and in our risk management system we've changed from annual to quarterly reports. The entire board is in close dialogue with employees. In addition to these things, we've reordered our whistleblower system. That isn't a full list, but there's plenty that remains to be done.

Employees are reluctant to denounce their colleagues or superiors.

“But it's not about denouncing anyone.”

But it's not about denouncing anyone. If an employee learns that a colleague is doing something illegal, the first step is to talk to them. If that doesn't work, it should be taken to a superior. Reports can also be made anonymously. The

point is to prevent illegal actions and keep them from bringing the company ...

... into disrepute.

(Angered) Much more than that. At Volkswagen, it isn't a minor thing. The scandal was a serious blow to a strong and very successful company. Calling someone a traitor because they want to prevent that just reveals a lack of courage.

If you put yourself in the place of the people who were involved in the manipulation, can you understand them a little bit?

You can explain their motivation. But I can't understand that kind of behavior, and as a board member I can't accept it by any means. If customers don't trust you any longer, you're out of business. Which is to say, compliance and integrity are also economic factors.

In recent weeks, new details have come to light and new accusations have been made against management. Do you sometimes ask yourself “What have I gotten myself into?”

No. I'm not the kind of person who looks back and asks “What if?” That doesn't interest me. Once I've decided to take on a task, I dig into it. I make it my field, and my motivation and objectives are clear. Now I'm at Volkswagen. I knew this job wouldn't be a walk in the park.

When will you consider what you've started here to be a success?

When Volkswagen's good reputation has been restored, and our employees can look to the future with pride and optimism. ◀