

»LEADERSHIP UNDER PRESSURE IS ABOUT CLARITY, EMPATHY, AND ADAPTABILITY. IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY, PEOPLE LOOK FOR STABILITY AND DIRECTION, SO I LEARNED THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATING TRANSPARENTLY, EVEN WHEN NOT ALL ANSWERS ARE AVAILABLE.«

MARISKA KRAAIJ,
SENIOR PROJECT MANAGER
DD & BD EXECUTION,
SANDOZ / HEXAL AG,
GERMANY,
GMP 2023 ALUMNA,
EMBA 2025-2027 ATTENDEE,
THE NETHERLANDS

January 2026

*Interviewed by Vera Pasynkova,
photos: Mariska Kraaij and IEDC*

You are a chemist by education, graduating from University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht. Why did you choose chemistry as your field of study? Looking back, how did your education in chemistry influence the way you think, solve problems, and lead today?

I originally considered becoming a veterinarian because of my love for animals and strength in biology, but

the competitive selection process led me to choose chemistry instead. It allowed me to stay curious, constantly asking 'why' and seeking solutions to complex problems. My education strengthened my analytical and problem-solving skills, which I still apply today when leading teams and projects, approaching challenges with a structured and scientific mindset.

Your career so far has taken you from hands-on analytical work to senior

leadership and global project roles. When you look back, which moment or decision do you see as a true turning point in your professional journey?

Two key moments stand out. First, the trust and support I received from my colleagues and especially manager at Teva in the Netherlands, which accelerated my professional growth. Second, after Teva's departmental closure, my partner and I decided to move from the Netherlands to

Parma, Italy, to continue our work in respiratory R&D. That decision not only advanced my career but also enriched me as a person through exposure to a new environment, culture and language.

You have worked and lived in three different countries. How did it shape your leadership style and the way you work with people? What differences did you notice in leadership culture and collaboration as you moved from the Netherlands to Italy and later to Germany? Which country or work culture challenged you the most professionally?

Living and working abroad is something I recommend to everyone, it teaches you more about people, culture and adaptability than you could ever learn at home. The Netherlands and Italy were worlds apart, and no training could have prepared us for the three and a half challenging but wonderful years we spent there. We embraced the differences with curiosity and openness, which ultimately made me more self-aware and adaptable as a leader. Moving to Germany felt closer to Dutch culture, yet we realized how much Italy had changed us and different Germany still is from us. These experiences

taught me that leadership requires flexibility and cultural sensitivity - and yes, we now fully understand why Italians suffer abroad without their cuisine and coffee!

You have led teams with deep expertise and diverse backgrounds. What did leadership mean to you when you first stepped into a managerial role - and how has that understanding evolved over time?

My first leadership role at Teva was short-lived and rather operational, focused on technical expertise and keeping a small team

see as the foundation of effective leadership.

One of your proudest achievements was guiding a department through significant disruption while improving both performance and team morale. What did this experience teach you about leadership under pressure?

Guiding a department through significant disruption taught me that leadership under pressure is about clarity, empathy, and adaptability. In times of uncertainty, people look for stability and direction, so I learned the importance



motivated during a difficult complete departmental redundancy period. Later, as Department Head at Sandoz, leadership became about long-term strategy, network management, and people development. Each role - from Teva to Chiesi to Sandoz - taught me something new, and my managers played a big part in shaping my approach. Experiencing both strong support and its absence helped me understand the impact of trust and empowerment, which I now

of communicating transparently, even when not all answers are available. I focused on setting clear priorities and creating a sense of purpose, which helped the team stay aligned and motivated. Equally important was listening and showing empathy. Disruption often brings stress, so acknowledging concerns and involving the team in problem-solving build trust and boost morale. Finally, I learned that adaptability is key, plans can change rapidly,

For me, the most rewarding part is knowing that the work I do truly makes a difference for patients. Providing access to affordable, high-quality medicines is not just a business goal, it is a purpose I deeply believe in.



and a leader must remain calm, make informed decisions quickly, and empower others to do the same.

The pharmaceutical and generics industry is highly regulated, fast-paced, and global. What do you find most intellectually and personally rewarding about working in this environment?

For me, the most rewarding part is knowing that the work I do truly makes a difference for patients. Providing access to affordable, high-quality medicines is not just a business goal, it is a purpose I deeply believe in. At Sandoz, seeing the impact in numbers (over 900 million patient treatments and billions in healthcare savings) is incredible, but what really drives me is the thought that behind every statistic is someone whose life is better because of what we do. That sense of contributing to global health keeps me motivated every day. And the cherry on top? I get to do this with a highly skilled, motivated, diverse and international team, delivering on demanding timelines while having fun along the way.

Moving from a technical leadership role into business development and due diligence marked an important expansion of your professional scope. What motivated you to take this step, and what has surprised you most so far?

After nearly 20 years in analytical chemistry product development, I wanted to broaden my perspective and understanding of other drug dosage forms and strategic decision-making at another level of the organization. Business development and due diligence offered that opportunity, connecting technical expertise with commercial impact.

As a project manager, you often need to lead without

formal authority, which requires an even greater emphasis on communication, trust-building, and strategic thinking compared to a traditional managerial role. This experience has reinforced how critical these leadership skills are in shaping success.

After many years of professional growth through experience, what prompted you to first enroll into the General Management Program at IEDC and now into an Executive MBA? Was the decision solely yours and if you considered other business schools?

After sharing my interest in pursuing an MBA with my best manager to date, Alenka Štefanič Petek, she recommended starting with the GMP at IEDC instead. As an IEDC GMP alumna, she spoke highly of the program, and I trusted her advice. The GMP in 2023 was an excellent experience, it broadened my perspective and confirmed my desire to deepen my business knowledge even further. That's why I decided to enroll in the Executive MBA at IEDC In 2025, with the full support of my new manager, Robert Pišek, who is also an IEDC GMP alumnus.

What were your biggest takeaways from General



Management Program?

As a scientist by training, the GMP gave me my first formal exposure to business management beyond pharmaceuticals. It introduced me to strategic leadership, holistic business thinking, and offered a valuable glimpse into finance and marketing - areas that were completely new to me. What I enjoyed most was the opportunity to network and build lasting connections with like-minded professionals from diverse sectors and countries.

What are your expectations for the Executive MBA and how is it going so far?

My expectations for the Executive MBA are to gain a deeper understanding of the topics touched on during the

GMP, with broader strategic perspective, strengthening my leadership skills, and building a diverse network of peers from different industries. I would like to challenge myself beyond my current role and develop tools to navigate complex business environments. The program is highly engaging and practical, combining academic rigor with real-world application. The diversity of the professors and classmates bring fresh insights, and the discussions have already helped me think differently about communication and finance. It's demanding, but the learning experience and the connections make it incredibly rewarding.

Based on your experience so far, what advice would you give to professionals considering an executive education and who may be

questioning whether it is the right time or the right step?

My advice would be to view executive education as an investment in yourself rather than just a career move. There is rarely a 'perfect' time - work and life will always be busy, but the benefits go beyond knowledge. It's about expanding your perspective, building a network of peers, and gaining confidence to tackle complex challenges under high time pressure. If you feel a gap between where you are and where you want to be, that might be a strong signal, that pursuing an EMBA might be the right step. Think long-term: the value compounds over time.

WHAT ONE CANNOT FIND ON MARISKA'S RESUME



GMP 2023, EMBA 2025 - 27

Mariska Kraaij

the Netherlands

Senior Project Manager

DD & BD Execution

Sandoz / Hexal AG, Germany

How many languages do you speak? Which one would you like still to learn and why? Do you do Duolingo?

I currently speak four languages: Dutch, English, German, and (by now, a bit rusty) Italian. I've kept up a 1,066-day streak on Duolingo to either improve or maintain my German and Italian, which has been a fun challenge! As for what's next: I would learn the language of the country I live in, because language is, for me, the key to

truly integrating. So, let's see what the future holds!

What's the Dutch thing you miss the most while you are living abroad?

Hagelslag and Stroopwafels! That's definitely the Dutch thing I miss the most. And, of course, the typical Dutch attitude of not taking everything too seriously, keeping life light and full of humour.

What boardgames do you like to play?

Any card game is always a winner, but if we're talking true Dutch classics, then Keezbord is a must! And of course, Catan, because nothing says gezelligheid like negotiating sheep for bricks over a cup of coffee.

Do you practice any sports or follow closely as a fan?

I have always loved sports! I started as a gymnast and later played rugby, which taught me a lot about discipline and teamwork. These days, I'm more into individual and outdoor activities - squash, biking (of course, I'm Dutch!), running, hiking, swimming, and even bootcamp sessions. Keeps me fit... or at least keeps me fitting into my clothes!

Snowboard or skis? Best slope for you so far?

I switched to snowboarding and honestly, those boots are a game-changer! No more foot and knee pain, and way more comfort. While I love the Austrian après-ski vibe, my favorite slopes so far are in the Super Dolomiti area. The scenery, the runs, and the food - it's hard to beat!

Do you play any music instruments?

I cannot even read music, sorry to disappoint! My musical talent is limited to singing along in the car and hoping no one hears me.

Where did you spend your last holidays and doing what?

Over Christmas, we went diving in Egypt. But the real holiday highlight of 2025 was our two-week road trip through Tunisia, exploring its stunning landscapes, lovely people, rich history and culture. I can highly recommend it!

Who is your favorite Big Bang theory character and why?

As a scientist, of course I have watched the show! It's hilarious and full of clever references, but honestly, I don't have a single favourite character. They all bring something unique to the mix, and that's what makes the show so entertaining for me.

The latest TV series you watched and would recommend?

The last series I watched was The Great, though I am not sure I would fully recommend it! What I can recommend is The Good Doctor. It is about a gifted surgical resident with autism and savant syndrome navigating his professional and personal life. For me, it is not just a medical drama, it is a powerful story about diversity and inclusion, and how we can create environments where everyone can thrive.

What's the oddest thing for you to find in Slovenia? What's odd? Honestly, what is not to love about

Slovenia. You are the only country in the world with the word "love" in your name! That is unique and beautiful, just as the country itself.

Favorite "chemist" joke?

I'd tell you a chemistry joke... but all the good ones Argon.

What's one hobby or interest that is not listed on your CV?

I experiment with the perfect way to warm up a stroopwafel on my teacup. It's a delicate balance of timing and patience - practically a PhD-level hobby in the Netherlands.

How many bikes does an average Dutch person has?

On average, a Dutch person owns about 1.3 bikes. But let's be honest, that is just math - in reality, it is more like 3: a city bike, a sports bike, and a 'back-up wreckage bike' for emergencies. Personally, I have 4 (don't judge), but my partner only has 2, so together we are perfectly average - very Dutch, right?

Do you have any pets or had pets in your childhood?

I grew up in what you could call a small zoo - fishes, hamsters, bunnies, guinea pigs, dogs, cats, goats, sheep, horses... you name it, we probably had it. Fast forward to today: my partner and I are now proudly ruled by two furry cats who clearly think they own the house (and us). And honestly... they are probably right!

