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Lessons in Leadership from... Amanda Wakeley

We will be featuring
table leading figures
series, with the aim of
useful insights for our
the NHS. This month:
her Amanda Wakeley.

Jyoti Shah Series Editor

Amanda Wakeley OBE is a British fashion designer and founder of the iconic London-based luxury fashion label that bears her name. She founded her company in 1991 and created a brand that is synonymous with all that is glamorous. She went on to lose the company with her name but returned, eventually buying it back. Since then, she has revolutionised the fashion industry and her clothes have been worn by Diana Princess of Wales, Queen Rania of Jordan, the Duchess of Cambridge, Demi Moore, Kate Winslet, Helen Mirren and many more.

HER STORY

Amanda Wakeley is the daughter of the surgeon and second Baronet of Liss Sir John Wakeley and Lady June Wakeley, a physiotherapist. She grew up in privilege, boarding at Cheltenham Ladies' College. Her grandfather, Sir Cecil Wakeley (1892–1979) qualified in 1915, joined the Royal Navy and in 1922 was appointed to the staff of King's College Hospital, and was a senior surgeon at the age of 41.

In 1947 he founded the *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* and continued as Editor until 1969. He was President of the Royal College of Surgeons from 1949 to 1954.

Amanda had no formal training, but from her earliest childhood days she would buy fabric from the market and make things, or alter the contents of her dressing-up box. For her, this was innate and intuitive.

After school, she travelled to Hungary and then America, working as a model in New York. Upon return to the UK, she set up her label in 1990 with a loan from her father. Her style caught the attention of the then-Deputy Editor of *Vogue*, who thought Amanda's styles would work for the Princess of Wales.

With the princess's patronage the Amanda Wakeley fashion label soon became a household name. But disaster was just around the corner. In 2000, she divorced her husband and business partner, who sold the Amanda Wakeley label to Richard Caring. Amanda had thrown her energies into the creative aspect of her business, leaving her husband to deal with the figures. Her divorce left her as an employee owning just 20% of the company that bore her name.

Worse still, Caring sold the business to a Saudi billionaire in 2005, who then sold it on three years later to former city trader Jason Granite. The latest restructuring rollercoaster left no place for Wakeley, who tendered her resignation just a week after the takeover.

'Yes, it was shocking, but I've never been one to sit around and lick my wounds. You just get on, pick yourself up, dust yourself off,' she says.

Several months later, with a renewed sense of focus, she re-acquired the Amanda Wakeley brand and was firmly back in the driving seat. Now, having learnt many lessons, she is obsessed with detail. There is no task too small for her to oversee in the business and she is up to speed with all that goes on.

SURGICAL GENE

Wakeley has medicine in her genes. She has always been fascinated by the female form and anatomy, and as a child would read her father's medical text books. It was the smell in the operating theatre that put her off following in his footsteps.

Since 1996, Amanda has co-chaired the committee for the Fashion Targets Breast Cancer appeal. Originally launched by Ralph Lauren in America after he lost a dear friend to breast cancer, the UK charity has far outstripped its American counterpart and has raised millions for breast cancer research and awareness.

Left: Amanda Wakeley, photographed in front of a painting of her grandfather and founder of the *Annals*, Cecil Wakeley. The painting hangs above the main staircase in the Royal College of Surgeons.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS

Amanda Wakeley is a persistent person and her departure from her company exemplified this. She never gave up claiming ‘it’s all about having a passion for what you do’. She believes in making women feel great in what they are wearing every day and not just those red carpet moments. ‘It’s about empowering women through their clothes,’ she tells me.

She describes herself as a true survivor and believes that how one deals with challenges is the maker or breaker of a person. Even when her name was taken from her, she stayed focused on achieving her goals.

Wakeley sees her team as a big daisy chain holding hands and helping each other to grow and develop. Her attention to detail both to the business and her staff is apparent, and she believes that kindness and showing everyone she cares is paramount.

As the leader of an organisation who displays kindness in her work, business and for her team, she hopes ‘that ethic is passed down’. She says: ‘We need to grow teams from within.’

The fashion industry, like the NHS, is a huge juggernaut where individuals can get lost because of the sheer size. ‘Smiling, being polite and not rude and abrupt. Thirty seconds to one minute can transform someone’s day.’ Such lessons can easily be shared across industries.

THE LAST WORD

‘Be passionate. If you don’t get out of bed and look forward to what you’re doing, then that’s a sad day.’

Amanda’s five favourite things

1. Family, including my partner
2. Being in the elements – water-skiing, country, by the sea
3. Nature
4. My dog
5. Beauty

Cecil Wakeley - Amanda’s surgical pedigree

- Born in 1892, the eldest of 12 children
- Went to King’s College Hospital in 1910, where he received the Jelf Medal for Surgery
- Qualified in 1915
- Became a senior surgeon at the age of 41
- Founded the *Annals of the Royal College of Surgeons of England* in 1947
- Made a Baronet in 1952
- Remained Editor of the *Annals* until 1969
- Elected President of the Hunterian Society for 1961
- President of The Royal College of Surgeons of England from 1949 to 1954



Amanda with a Council chair commemorating her grandfather Cecil Wakeley
Photograph by Paresh Solanki

Coming next month... Clive Woodward