

Redefining Leadership



Women at the helm of EU Agencies





Introduction

The mission of European Union Agencies and Joint Undertakings is to bring the EU closer to citizens. They do that by providing policy support, trainings, advice, and expertise in areas such as health, innovation, justice, freedom and security, energy, transport, education, environment, economy, work, and wellbeing. Every year one of them coordinates the work of the EU Agencies Network (EUAN) by overviewing strategic priorities and promoting best practice in different areas. In 2022 Fusion for Energy (F4E), the European Joint Undertaking for ITER and the development of fusion energy, acted as chair.

To celebrate the International Women's Day on 8 March, we invited the women Executive Directors of EU Agencies to discuss how they are redefining leadership. Six of them participated in an online talk and those who could not make it, were interviewed separately. It was the first time in the history of the EUAN that such topic was discussed, giving Executive Directors the opportunity to openly share their personal and professional experiences.

Their conversations were powerful and inspiring because they were frank, came from the heart, and offered words of advice that resonated beautifully with audiences. Following the success of this initiative, we decided to capture their views by putting together this publication. It feels like hearing their voices narrating their journey.

These leaders talk with conviction and passion about their work and the choices they made to get where they are. Some go back in time to recall their career steps, the importance of mentors and role models. Others, elaborate on the importance of values and how they have influenced their style of leadership. There is humility in what they say because they are not afraid to reconsider their opinions and they accept that power comes with vulnerability. There is empowerment in their actions because they allow others to grow and potentially challenge them. And there is emotional intelligence in delivering results because they are convinced that this can only be done with colleagues by their side.

There are points that they agree, and others that they question one another without judgement, because there are many ways of practicing authentic leadership. They accept that that they are entitled to their own truth even if that may lead them to different conclusions. It is precisely what made this encounter of minds rich, diverse, and inclusive. There is room for different opinions to be heard and space to raise valid questions for which we may not have one right answer.

However, one of the key lessons we draw is that leadership does not rest in the hands of one but, instead, is a choice for many. It is important to believe in our skills, in taking risks, and in learning from trying. The leaders of this publication dare us to challenge ourselves and others. In this collection of testimonies, there is an underlying question posed to those who aspire to lead but hesitate: If not you, then who?

We would like to thank the Executive Directors of the EU Agencies for their involvement in this initiative and for wishing to be part of this publication. Special thanks to Alessia Vecchio, F4E Head of Administration, and Olga Borissova, Chair of the EUAN Diversity & Inclusion Network, for championing this idea, the EU Agencies Shared Support Office and Txell Parera for the logistics, Martial Boulguy for the visual work, Aris Apollonatos for moderating the talk and converting it into this publication.

The talk took place few days after the invasion in Ukraine. It was dedicated to women—the invisible heroes that are never filmed on the battlegrounds but are always there behind the scenes to pick up the pieces.

Andrea Ammon

Director of the European
Centre for Disease Prevention
and Control (ECDC)



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Being a leader
also means being
led by others.

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Humanising leadership is what makes it real and authentic.

For me leadership is about offering a vision and setting a direction. When you find yourself at the helm of an organisation, you need to set objectives on what needs to be achieved and how. This can only be done with the meaningful involvement of internal and external parties because you have to listen to their opinion in order to take decisions. Being a leader also means being led by others.

What makes us different, however, is how we explain these decisions and what is the logic behind them.

This is why integrity and fairness are fundamentally important when practicing leadership by putting the interests of staff at the centre of our priorities. We may not be able to grant all wishes but we should at least listen and consider them.

Pace is equally important, and one should avoid taking decisions lightly or hastily. A leader should put things in balance and make the right call at the right time. Our judgement should be based on facts and consequences because decisions are measured by their soundness, credibility, and wider acceptance.

Delivering change is one of the most difficult tasks in leadership. It requires time, planning, ownership, and a change in mindset. A leader needs to involve people to be part of change whether this is a re-organisation or the introduction of new practices that can trigger off a cultural shift. Part of the answer lies in direct communication and the breaking of silos to foster new dynamics. The other part rests on engagement, listening and a realistic time frame.

The pandemic was a real test for leadership because of its disruptive nature and the pressure to act fast. In our case it had a severe impact on the workload performed by the ECDC and the terrific response offered by our committed staff. But it also highlighted the importance of a sound, safe and caring working environment.

It is important for leaders to pause and look in the mirror to see if they can recognise themselves and the values they represent.

On this journey always remember that you are not alone. It's important to make room for others to grow, to exist with their ideas and doubts. And if along the way mistakes are made, accept that this is normal because we all do. Learn from them and admit them because humanising leadership is what makes it real and authentic. It is equally important to understand yourself, and your personal journey in taking decisions, because our experiences, emotions, and perceptions influence us.

My advice to future leaders: Believe in yourself! Do not let others tell you can't. Find for yourself if you can!

Natasha Cazenave

Executive Director of the European
Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA)



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If you wish to be a leader,
my advice is go for it!

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Our turn to demonstrate that it is possible for women to have leadership roles.

It is a privilege to be Executive Director of an EU agency. The context we operate in is quite unique, a collaborative multicultural environment that adheres to a set of values and gives us a sense of purpose serving the public interest. It is also our responsibility to provide an open and inclusive working environment aligned with our European values.

Looking back to what the previous generations of female leaders have achieved, one can only be inspired, and express gratitude because they stood up for our rights and place in society.

It is our turn to pursue their endeavour and demonstrate that it is possible for women to have leadership roles and to help more women dare come forward.

We also need to look beyond gender and consider more broadly the issues related to diversity and inclusion to ensure our organisations reflect the society we live in.

Raising awareness, taking concrete steps and monitor progress, we are embarking on this important journey to help fight bias.

Mentoring is one tool to support women, help them grow, build self-confidence, and encourage them to aim at leadership positions. In my career, I had the chance of being supported by brilliant men who have encouraged me and challenged me to take the next step in leadership. I am extremely grateful to them and hope we can enable many more women to unleash their potential.

To those who wish to be leaders my advice is to go for it!

Emer Cooke

Executive Director of the European Medicines Agency (EMA)



©EMA

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Many women tend to underestimate their potential when they could be the best candidate.

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Ask yourself: If not you, then who?

I see leadership as making things happen. When you are in such position, you need to champion the values you want to see grow in your organisation. You have to be brave, to listen, to enable your stakeholders and your staff. But you also need to be very clear about the context in which you operate. It is not always easy to navigate through the different perspectives, and complexities, but it is necessary to pave a clear path.

Part of being a leader is working together to develop a vision and creating the environment to facilitate change. Admittedly, one of the most difficult parts in leadership is applying change. You need to understand the nature of change, how to communicate it, and most importantly, how to facilitate it. We often forget to ask ourselves whether we have the right tools. Timing and context are crucial in implementing change because they have an impact on response, application, ownership, and acceptance.

Are we redefining leadership purely because of our gender? Not necessarily. Personality, acumen, and style play a huge role in defining the choices we make.

We need to welcome constructive criticism and critical thinking. Receiving and acting upon feedback is what makes a leader better, being more in-tune with others' realities and more transparent in admitting error or revisiting a decision.

With time we have come to accept that leadership comes with vulnerability, humility, and there is nothing wrong with that. It helps to make leaders relatable, accessible, and human.

For decades leadership positions were seen out of reach for women. I had a good friend, and a woman leader, who had approximately the same career path as myself, and she really encouraged me to do things that I wouldn't necessarily have thought of doing. She used to tell me: "Well, you can do that, why not you?". I think that inspired me to pass that same message on to others.

Many women tend to underestimate their potential when they could be the best candidate. Our instinct is not to put ourselves forward. My message is to believe in yourself and dare to try.

Rise to the challenge when an opportunity presents itself. If we want to change the environment we need to start with the mindset. It is also about taking responsibility and moving things forward.

Earlier I mentioned that leadership is a navigating challenge. The pandemic was the perfect storm during which EMA was thrust into the limelight almost overnight. This challenge brought out the best in us as an organisation. The public health emergency gave us a renewed sense of purpose, a real feeling that we were serving the citizens of Europe. It confronted us with new responsibilities and to find new ways to collaborate. For instance, our communication workload increased by nearly 600%. We had to steer a process that affected the wellbeing of all Europeans. I give credit to my staff and to the experts of the European Medicines Regulatory Network. They are the ones who delivered. My role as a leader was to enable them to do so, putting focus on priorities and steering our work so that we could both deliver on time, and ensure that no compromise was made on our standards for quality, safety and the efficacy of medicines and vaccines.

Catherine De Bolle

Executive Director of the European Union
Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation
(Europol)



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Think of leadership
as an opportunity to
improve things and
do not shy away from
confronting the truth.

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**Leadership is meaningful when you live
by the values it represents.**

I strongly believe in the idea of justice, and I'm convinced that it must prevail. There is a real alignment between my set of values, and those of the organisation I head, which stands for the protection of fundamental rights, security, liberty, law, and democracy. The principles we champion are part of our collective mission to provide for a better, safer, and more inclusive world. Leadership is meaningful when you live by the values it represents, which for me are integrity, responsibility, and fairness. If you strongly believe in what you do, then you are truly engaged.

Being a good listener and showing empathy are necessary skills in leadership positions. One needs to be able to make sense of the different signals, even if they are providing contradictory information, and then attach importance to what really matters.

In an organisation made of experts, it is natural that people will have strong opinions, but those who lead should have the capacity to distinguish between constructive criticism and resistance. Ultimately, part of the job of being a leader is taking decisions and taking responsibility. This said, I see no problem if one chooses to reconsider a decision based on new facts. It's not an illustration of vulnerability, on the contrary, it is a demonstration of strength, adaptability, and humility in responding better to the issues addressed.

The world is constantly changing and so should we. Otherwise, we risk becoming irrelevant. Introducing change in an organisation requires first for the leader to change and to inspire staff. If you do not set an example, how can you expect others to follow?

Therefore, be sincerely committed to what you advocate because during the journey you will be questioned about your goals. Your actions should speak to the big majority that will support your vision. At Europol, for instance, we have put in place a strategic co-ordination platform which helps us inform and involve staff concerned.

This brings me to courage, another virtue that a leader should have, to build credibility and trust.

Think of leadership as an opportunity to improve things and do not shy away from confronting the truth. Unquestionably, there will be moments of pressure and even of personal sacrifice. But there is also the possibility of a better version of things. The hope that we can be better is a powerful driving force.

In terms of tools available to form tomorrow's leaders, mentoring is incredibly valuable. However, during my time in the police force, there were no women mentors because there were none in senior ranks. This is no longer the case because things have evolved, and we pushed for change. I do feel, however, that some of that extra pressure is still felt by women, when for instance they need to put more effort to impress and convince they can do the same job. My advice to them is do not limit your potential, understand we all make mistakes. It's an opportunity to learn from them, become wiser, and grow.

Nina Gregori

Executive Director of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

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I believe that adaptability is key to the survival of a leader.

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Passion, the drive to aim high, and a positive mindset can unleash a leader's potential.

To understand the impact of leadership we need to comprehend the influence it exerts and the motivation it transmits. Think of it as a continuous conversation between different parties that have a say with distinct lines of accountability and responsibility. Communication plays an important role to listen and discuss different concerns in a safe environment, where people can be respected, and feel confident to express different opinions. This said, there is a difficult balancing act of negotiation and reconciliation of objectives in taking decisions. A leader is often measured by the ability to bring around the same table different views and then leave with a common plan.

A clear vision and a common set of values are a solid foundation for successful leadership. Vision gives us projection to where we want to go, and values are the guiding light of how we want to get there together.

If a leader manages to steer the way in an inclusive and transparent manner, then members of staff will feel part of this journey. During their lifecycle, organisations need to change and adapt. The best way to go about it is by ensuring a degree of stability and progressively introduce new elements to amend the status quo.

One of the most difficult tasks in the daily life of a leader is connecting with staff and engaging in a meaningful way. It requires time to listen and to be listened, interaction and exchanges that facilitate dialogue. The context we perform leadership is also very important because people have references and role models. For example, asylum, migration, and integration have often been associated with strong male figures exercising law and order. Women must challenge these stereotypes and not feel threatened. They need to be encouraged and empowered to take the next step. And if things do not work out from the start, there is no reason to feel disappointed. Keep trying, adjusting, and evolving.

I have drawn strength and inspiration from my grandmother who survived the Second World War and was in a concentration camp. She was a strong woman with a natural gift to multi-task and an advocate in promoting the participation of women in all activities. In my opinion, we should not differentiate because of our gender, and not feel threatened of women in leadership positions. I believe that adaptability is key to the survival of a leader. There many forms of leadership practiced and transmitted differently regardless of gender. What unites them, however, is passion, the drive to aim high, and a positive mindset that helps them remove limits.

Women must challenge these stereotypes and not feel threatened. They need to be encouraged and empowered to take the next step.

Ildikó Horváth

Director of the Translation Centre for the Bodies of the European Union (CdT)

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Delivering leadership is about finding the right balance between priorities, wishes, timing and change.

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©CdT

Leadership is about inspiring people and making them happy about their work environment.

Delivering leadership requires a mix of skills to connect with the hearts and minds of colleagues. There is an aspect of planning and forecasting as to how things may unfold, which must be done with a pro-active, and caring attitude towards people, because they are under the responsibility of the Director. Our members of staff need to feel respected, listened to and understood. Leadership is not only about monitoring indicators in terms of delivery and celebrating milestones. Most importantly, it is about inspiring people and keeping them happy and engaged in their work environment.

Although a leader is here to take decisions, the idea of one way or of a single truth is something that makes me uncomfortable.

Decisions must result from dialogue and a lot of communication. There is wisdom and strength in recognising that an opinion needs to be revisited.

It shows humbleness and reminds us that we are humans and far from being perfect. It is also the affirmation that collective intelligence is more inclusive and richer. Acting as a leader does not imply necessarily being on the top of decision-making. There is widespread talent in an organisation where colleagues behave as leaders.

The core values that I like to champion are openness, consistency, and credibility. Leading by example and acting in a consistent manner are essential. Delivering leadership is about finding the right balance between priorities, wishes, timing and change. It is also a judgement call as to what can be solved and what cannot.

Enjoying what you do is important because it will give you this extra drive. I am fortunate to work in a field which is interesting, giving me back a lot of satisfaction.

Literature has always been a source of inspiration to me. Some of the answers that you are looking for in work will come to you from an activity or an exchange outside.

There is power in art, and it has the capacity to transform our minds in ways that we cannot imagine by giving us strength or challenging our views.

Time management and work-life balance is something that I feel strongly about because they are conducive to sound decisions. As a mother of four, I learned that having a family is a full-time lifelong career. It requires energy, emotional and physical strength to listen, engage and to let grow. Much of this is replicated in the work environment relationships that need to be developed with colleagues based on respect and care.

In my opinion, we need more support mechanisms to help those who aspire to become leaders in managerial positions. Ultimately, everyone deserves a chance. And as for those who do not wish to pursue this path, there should be no pressure and no judgement.

Maja Markovčić Kostelac

Executive Director of the European
Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA)



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Beyond checks and
balances, leadership must
bring hope and deliver
empowerment.

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**If you want to lead by example and be credible
you must be an advocate of your principles.**

Honesty and integrity are the two values that I consider as irreplaceable in delivering leadership. Our credos say a lot about who we are, what matters to us, the way we understand, react, and decide. To lead by example and be credible you must be an advocate of your principles. Our personality also plays a significant role on how we express these values and our style of leadership.

Those who lead must understand that they are one part of the decision-making process. The centralised top-down model where those at the helm know best, has been replaced by one of participatory leadership.

Start with an open mind and be prepared to hear different opinions that will make you revisit your original position. This is the beauty of group dynamics during which we discover how power is rebalanced and why we must give up part of our ground to build a new common ground.

If there are too many voices with strong opinions, it is for the leader to distil the information and take a decision in a timely manner. Responsibility and accountability come with the job.

Beyond checks and balances, leadership must bring hope and deliver empowerment. It must transmit a sense of optimism that we can do great things together. This can manifest in all levels of the organisation because we can draw inspiration from everyone.

We must acknowledge, however, that the path to leadership requires determination because it is paved with personal as well as professional sacrifices. When it comes to systemic impediments that hinder women disproportionately, then we need to scratch beneath the surface and understand the reasons, how to attract more of them, make work more inclusive, and raise awareness to all staff to fight prejudice and bias. We need a balanced approach that speaks to women and men, because they both have an important role in addressing this issue.

Our upbringing influences greatly the way we perceive ourselves and our potential. For example, my parents gave me a sense of strength, courage, and helped me to believe in me. I think we should create our path with passion and commitment. Undoubtedly there will be obstacles along the way, but they teach us things about who we are and what we are capable for.

Therefore, look for projection and personal growth and avoid getting too comfortable in what you do.

Search for happiness and a sense of purpose without letting bad experiences haunt you. What matters in life is what you learn to continue your journey by becoming intellectually wiser and emotionally stronger.

Maria Montserrat Marín López

Executive Director of the European Union Agency
for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)



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Compassion and encouragement,
motivation and empathy
are necessary.

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A leader is a strategic enabler with the power to empower.

It is vital to analyse leadership in the setting where it is applied. In the work environment, leadership is about providing a sense of trust and connection. A leader is a strategic enabler with the power to empower others. Someone with the capacity to bring all parties together as a consensus builder. A servant that generates growth and development for the team and promotes career progression. Someone who turns around underperformance, boosts motivation and discovers the true hidden, invisible leaders present in every team.

What is equally important is to review the values attached to leadership.

A leader must be open to multi-culturalism and diversity. Inclusion is also fundamentally important. Leading by example, being honest and coherent are essential attributes of a leader.

Leading by example, being honest and coherent are essential attributes of a leader. Compassion and encouragement, motivation and empathy are necessary. Although men are receptive to the application of these values, quite often, in law enforcement, they tend to come second in ranking when assessing a leader. We must apply our own values humanly, with care and a sound knowledge of facts because the decisions we take at work may have an impact on the personal life of colleagues.

Leadership has no gender because it is a question of merits and capabilities. Historically, however, a distinction was made based on availability and dedication, which created a clear disadvantage for women as they had to juggle with home and children

on top of work. We have therefore witnessed irregular or non-linear careers, stereotypes, and biases regarding soft skills versus hard skills. In the end, these experiences have made women multi-faceted and greatly adaptable. They have even learnt to develop multiple identities. On the contrary, men have been educated to operate in a culture of competition and to put extra effort at work.

More policies must be in place to improve representation and gender equality on decision-making processes. Involving men in this conversation about leadership is the first step in making them aware of other realities.

Some of these corrective actions addressing gender balance may seem difficult to grasp but they are necessary to readjust the dynamics. Nobody is questioning merit. However, eventually, another discussion on merit needs to take place after we improve women's representation in decision-making.

We must not forget that we are living in times of change and other members in the organisation, and not only those at the helm, can take a leading role. My advice to them regardless of their gender is: Take risks if you feel strong about your principles; stand up to those who pretend to intimidate you; be mentally strong to defend yourself against stereotypes and biases; learn from senior managers but without succumbing to paternalism; and show respect to those more experienced without being afraid to speak up and express your opinions.

Carlien Scheele

Director of the European Institute
for Gender Equality (EIGE)

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Emotional intelligence
has been well documented
about the way women
perform leadership.

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©EIGE

Gender says a lot about the way we interact and lead. What society needs, however, is good leaders regardless of their gender.

The role of a leader is to offer direction. Think of it as preparing a journey we need to take by seeing clearly ahead on the horizon. Being brave and having the courage to decide are necessary to perform these tasks, provided they are carried out with care and compassion to ensure that we are all moving together. Emotional intelligence has been well documented in research when studying leadership performed by women. By no means it should be perceived as a stereotype. On the contrary, it says a lot about the complexity and diversity of individuals in such roles. Gender is another variable that explains the way we interact, engage, decide, and lead.

This said, we should refrain from sketching the profile of a male/female leader in strict terms because other factors come to play. Therefore, a prescriptive approach to female leadership must be avoided at all costs. Ultimately, what society needs is good leaders regardless of their gender. We can all learn from one another as to how we can become better leaders.

Revisiting original opinions, managing change, and deciding how and when, are important facets of leadership.

Trust and the meaningful involvement of staff are essential in delivering change. If it is brought about, managed, and shared with colleagues it enjoys wider acceptance.

Leadership is also about evolving and progressing. To allow people to change and to improve, one should give them the opportunity to do so. A leader should put in place the conditions to allow colleagues to question themselves, see prospect in change, feel that their contribution is as important and necessary as everyone else's and not one is to spare. Although we are unique and different, we need to find common ground to make things work.

Mentoring is an extremely valuable tool and role models can be inspirational, no matter the gender of the mentor.

To make progress faster, we need male leaders to support this topic. In my case, the turning point in my career came when a male director spotted potential and encouraged me to take a first step in a managerial position. Since then, I have encouraged, and encouraged others to speak up, prepare well and believe in themselves. Do not limit your possibilities without trying. With time, learn to become a better version of you while staying real and aligned to your principles.

Susan Steele

Executive Director of the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA)



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Professionally I always disentangled gender from tasks because I firmly believe that tasks are for all.

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There are many definitions of leadership, whichever you use, it is a choice and there are many forms of exercising it.

Some words that come to my mind associated with leadership are responsibility, accountability, and the importance of leading by example. A leader should develop a vision for the organisation and engage with staff through various communication channels to take the best decisions.

Leadership is a choice and there are many forms of practicing it, at many levels both formally and informally.

We are all leaders by working on our values, living by them, and transmitting them every day.

A lot has to do with the setting and the possibility of creating a better future for all shaping the legacy of our organisation.

In terms of values and credos, a leader should believe in people, get the best out of them, help them grow and capitalise on their potential. Integrity is also extremely important, and being at the helm of decision making, a leader should take full responsibility for what happens in an organisation. Learning to listen is fundamental because you need to understand the context and the sensitivities of others. Prior to initiating any change, one needs to reflect on the effort it will require.

Change is one of the most difficult things because it disrupts habits, routines, and a certain way of doing things. Do not underestimate the work it requires. We should also keep an eye for cultural failings, which often are stumbling blocks. For this reason, it's important to bring people together and involve them.

As a leader you need to be ready to reconsider and choose your moments carefully.

One of my mottos is that it is easier to blow out a candle than a house fire. Learn to deal with issues early. Change deadlines and revisit if you sense that you are heading into a storm. A leader's capacity to pick signals and make sense of what matters is essential.

Two figures influenced my path to leadership. The first was my mother, who received many lifetime awards, having established the Association of Irish Farmhouse Cheesemakers, whose leadership was expressed through the transmission of skills by teaching other women how to make cheese. Today, this would be associated with mentoring and empowerment. I remember telling her that I was working really hard but felt that I was getting nowhere. She replied that I could be sitting on a stationary bicycle and cycle really hard and never get anywhere. She told me to pick my bicycle.

The other figure was my PhD supervisor, the first female Vice-President of the university, Professor Maire Mulcahy, who taught me the importance of hard work and the drive to excel. I asked her once about the glass ceiling and she replied that she had never seen it.

Personally, I never felt limited or intimidated by any glass ceiling. In the male-dominated environment of fisheries and marine biology, if one was good, one would make it regardless of their gender. Professionally I always disentangled gender from tasks because I firmly believe that tasks are for all.

My advice to new leaders is to invest in education and skills because they build a person. And to those men who may feel uncomfortable with female leaders, I would advise them to talk more about how this change makes them feel and open up.



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