

Interview series.

Leaders making a difference, 2024

International Women's Day Edition



Dr. Alexa Dembek

Chief Technology and Sustainability Officer,
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A born problem solver, Alexa Dembek has spent the past three decades at DuPont building winning teams, strengthening its innovation engine and driving impact across multiple leadership roles. As the company's current Chief Technology and Sustainability Officer, Alexa talks to dss+ about how innovation and sustainability are intertwined to deliver business value, how she stays motivated as a leader, and important lessons she's learned along her journey.

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Protect. Transform. Sustain.



You joined DuPont as a research chemist and a technical manager. How did that journey in technology and sustainability begin and how did it develop?

Science and technology opened so many doors for me personally and professionally. That foundation in solving for challenges broadened my field of vision, creating opportunities to expand in areas such as supply chain, manufacturing, sales and marketing and business leadership.

What it taught me was that no matter the area, no matter the role, the consistent focus is solving problems for customers; enabling them to drive growth. That's achieved through innovating new products and applications or resolving supply chain or business issues. Sustainability is embedded in growth. Those two go hand in hand. Both are aimed at value creation.



In what way can company culture, good leadership, and communication make a difference when creating sustainable value?

For me, it's about show more than tell – it's what's put into action that drives sustainable value creation.

I'm fortunate to be a leader of people at a company that has its core values -- safety and health, respect for people, highest ethical behavior and protect the planet – embedded in every decision we make, every action we take. We also are driven by our purpose of empowering the world with the essential innovations to thrive. Having those foundational pillars helps us strengthen our inclusive culture: Where we make sure that we have all voices heard -- voices from the market, voices from investors, and different functions coming together to problem solve and to make a difference to delight customers and to drive growth. Bringing those elements together gives us an advantage with customers and in the markets we serve. It guides us in our sustainability journey to innovate more, use less and empower everyone.





Q In what capacity do you see technology and innovation, your area of expertise, creating more sustainable business practices?

The number one way that we can lead sustainably is through innovation that addresses global challenges. It goes back to our purpose – creating the innovations that help people thrive. Every day in the markets we serve – whether that be in electronics, water, protection, industrial technologies or next-gen autos – we’re developing new technologies, new products to make water cleaner, buildings and homes more energy efficient, and achieve advancements in healthcare and advanced computing.

We look at the needs and the priorities of each industry where innovation and sustainability come together. And then how do we enable that? That’s our growth algorithm.

Q Based on your expertise, what impact do other functions in your company or your industry have in helping to create a sustainable business that is better positioned to withstand industry volatility and be successful over the long term?

Well, it’s quite evident that all in our industry are dealing as best as they can with short and near-term headwinds and volatility. Yet, for us at DuPont, success that emerges from the volatility is achieved when all our businesses and functions are fully aligned. Our short-term priorities on resilience, on operational discipline and excellence, on employee health and safety, are critical and have always been. The key is to imagine all functions and the roles they play as unique squares on a Rubik’s Cube, and the goal to solve that puzzle is to bring them all together -- whether it’s a function, a business, or a region, into how we prioritize what’s most important short term and long term for value and growth.

For example, we have a terrific managing process called the Sustainability Leadership Council, which has representatives from all businesses, functions, and regions, who set priorities together. All these priorities must be integrated and strategically aligned and relentlessly communicated in order for the council to have impact.

Because sustainability is fast moving, we must have it fully embedded in every nook and cranny of our businesses, but fueled by the corporate enterprise. The only way to see all faces of that Rubik’s Cube is to get everyone aligned to drive the highest priorities. And it’s been a fantastic journey. We’ve been driving this process for more than two years now. And what it does is it drives alignment on what’s most important. The results...we get speed and clearer decision making.





What are the current challenges on moving to a low carbon and more sustainable future?

The two biggest issues are the investment to decarbonize and technology advancement. So many of the decarbonization pathways require technologies that aren't yet mature or are at a very early stage of readiness. Everyone's focusing on what can we do now with technology that's available and what do we need to be able to do in the future from a technology perspective. For example, decarbonizing thermal energy is a difficult challenge. How do we do it? And how do we do it at scale, in an investable way?

This is also where collaboration up and down the value chain is important to make sure that we understand customer priorities, as well as supplier capabilities, because no one company can do this alone. Value chain collaboration is key to meet sustainability targets and goals. How do we drive aligned investment? And then how does the fundamental technology to decarbonize advance? What are the alternatives and are they ready at scale?



DuPont has had a very interesting journey. How integral has your role been with this transformation and what do you see for your role of CSO in the future?

Over the past five years as CTSO, I have worked alongside our CEO and have had a firm hand and front row seat in transforming DuPont into a premier multi-industrial company. We're far down the road in our transformation journey and have organized the company to address and capture high value and high growth in five market platforms: water, protection, advanced mobility, electronics, and industrial technologies. All these focus areas are driven by technology, require innovation, and really have sustainability as a foundation. I'd say the technology and the sustainability teams help enable the business strategy for how we win to deliver growth and competitive advantage.

That's where my role comes into play – answering the key questions, such as do we have the capabilities to be relevant to solve some of the toughest global challenges? Do we have the best and brightest to deliver the innovations that will achieve the transition to electric vehicles, or achieve water optimization, or enable electronics in advanced chips for AI. All these areas have a thread that binds them together to solve challenges...and that is the thread of sustainable innovation.



In such a male dominated industry, how do you empower yourself and the women around you? And what advice would you give to women who are interested in the Sustainability or Technology space?

I love Reshma Saujani's saying, "be brave, not perfect." Women need to make sure that we're not listening to a voice that does anything other than help us be brave and focus on what needs to get done. A former leader at DuPont had a picture of a plant in her office. And the phrase was "bloom where you're planted." And I think that's really empowering, to be able to think about how you can contribute and have the biggest impact in the role that you're in, whether it's an operational role, a safety role, a sustainability role, or a business role.

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Q What advice would you give to women who are interested in the sustainability or the technology space or both?

Be patient with the messiness. I have learned how to live with high levels of messiness. Because in that uncertainty, that's where the magic happens. That's where you can really make a difference. Find places where this impact can really matter. I tell a story about asking people to think about who's the oldest person that you know and love. And then think about the youngest person that you know and love. What's life going to be like when that youngest person is as old as the oldest person? That's the work of sustainability and innovation, fostering human potential, delivering on essential innovations, helping the planet.

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Q How do you stay motivated and inspired as a leader, and how do you try to motivate and inspire other women at your company?

A big part of my job is to make sure that we've got a workforce that is motivated, that can make a difference. We have outstanding impact engagement scores because people care about solving these problems for our customers. To me, that's tremendously motivating. And for women, it's the same, except we need to spend more time on being bold and brave. And I'm making sure that we can also stay focused on health and wellness. And I think that's true across the company. Everyone needs more flexibility. And I think since COVID, we've all had this opportunity to do a reset on how we can make sure that we're delivering against what we need for health and wellness as well as what the company needs.





What's the most important lesson you learned as you grew your career? Was it through a piece of advice, an experience, or something else?

The simplest theme throughout my career is focusing on how to make an impact. And that impact will vary from a manufacturing role to a business role to now my technology and sustainability role. But the algorithm to deliver that impact is what has stayed the same. I tell my teams, my problem solving has three points to it. Number one, focus on the problem to be solved. Number two, drive strategic alignment. And then number three is relentless communication. If we get that right, good things happen. That's my life lesson. No matter what situation I'm in, I refer to those three things: Do we really understand the problem? Do we have a hypothesis? Are we strategically aligned on the approach to solve it? And then a lot of times the challenges can be resolved with relentless communication. So that growth algorithm has been tested and true. If we get that right, good things happen.

I tell my teams, my problem solving has three points to it. Number one, focus on the problem to be solved. Number two, drive strategic alignment. And then number three is relentless communication. If we get that right, good things happen.



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