Interview.

Women Making a Difference in Sustainability, 2023.

Industry: Food & Nutrition.

Sibéal Bird

Global Sustainability Lead at Kerry

As Global Sustainability Lead for a multinational sustainable nutrition company, **Sibéal Bird** is passionate about educating and empowering people. Here she explains why integrating sustainability into business as usual is key.

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Q.

What has influenced your career choices and how did your journey in sustainability begin?

Having grown up on a farm I feel like sustainability, especially where food comes from, is inherent to every part of me. I've always had a natural interest in soil and the importance it plays in the finished product coming off the land. However, when it came to choosing a degree, I decided to study International Business, with a view that it would enable me to spend time away from Ireland and see the world. I did exactly that but after around 10 years in various roles I had a moment of clarity when I was working in a job that I absolutely loved in the whiskey industry. Whiskey is very sustainable in nature, because you are not planning for tomorrow, you're planning for ten, twenty years down the line. This really opened my eyes to the idea of strategic planning for the future, so I decided to go back to university and was accepted onto a specialist sustainability Master's degree that was specifically focused on the food industry. This gave me the opportunity to work for the UN, where I became fascinated with the power a body of that size can have to make an impact. I really loved the academic and research side of the degree, but it also taught me how much I love the commercial aspect of business and wanted to get back into the private sector. What I realised is that I like looking at the big players and how by just moving the dial slightly when there is scale involved, the impact can be so huge and that's what initially drew me to Kerry.

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Q.

What are the most critical elements that make a difference towards creating sustainable value in relation to company culture, good leadership, and communication?

It's all happening at such a pace at the moment that I think trust is the most critical part of leadership. Leaders need to trust their experts, trust themselves, and trust their people. Nobody has all the answers, nobody is doing everything right but it's a learning process and so you have to have leaders, and influencers, who are willing to operate in a space that they are not always comfortable with. With this level of uncertainty, agility is really important because the landscape is changing so dramatically, constantly evolving due to changes in legislation, customer demands, and external factors, whether that's economic or environmental. If you consider that 20 years ago, companies were getting to grips with digital and had a head of digital and digital teams, whereas now digital is integrated into everyone's role. That's how I see sustainability, it's not an add-on, it has to be integrated. This is the only way a business can truly become a sustainable business. To get to this point you need the right culture, achieved by educating and empowering everyone, using consistent messaging and communication. Then let people take control and take ownership of their own space. By educating individuals and bringing them on the journey with you, you are going to get much more buy-in and link their role back to the higher purpose of the company.

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Q.

In your opinion, what role does technology and innovation have in creating sustainable business solutions? And what are the main priorities?

The only way to succeed is a multi-pronged approach and innovation is at the core and going to be a key driver. Innovation means so many different things, but to me, it is about challenging how we think, and how we can do things better, and then using technology to enhance that. It's all about getting back to the fundamentals of sustainability; people, planet, and making an impact. To do this you need to address the most material risks, consider which risks to prioritise and then from that understand the necessary tradeoffs. It's complicated, there's no one solution, if we fix only one part of the supply chain, it's irrelevant as we need to fix the whole supply chain and ideally the entire food system. Ultimately innovation has to make economic sense, if not it's inherently unsustainable. Impact driven conversations around innovations are the way forward and it's a really exciting space to be in to be re-framing sustainability as a huge opportunity for businesses.

Q.

In your view, how do you integrate sustainability into other roles such as operational excellence to help to create a sustainable business that is resilient and better positioned to withstand industry volatility?

The key is not putting sustainability into a language people don't understand or relate to. For example, if a process is not efficient, it's not sustainable. But if it's an efficient process it's much more sustainable as it's saving the business money, maybe through using less energy or by creating less waste, you're ultimately saving money. So, you have to make sustainability tangible, so that other roles realise it's not outside the remit of their own role. It's about making sure everyone has to have a baseline of knowledge and then tailor that understanding to different functions, by talking their language. We have to stop talking about sustainability and start talking about efficiency, cost savings and waste management because that's the language the team are already using and have KPIs against. Ultimately, sustainably is not additional, it's business as usual. If we keep it locked in a sustainability team, then it's keeping people out. It is not for us to gate keep but instead we must empower, because it's everyone's responsibility.

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Q.

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

Misinformation and a lack of joined up thinking is a constant challenge, often resulting in the focus being on one element, which is often the wrong element in terms of importance. An example of this is palm oil, which yes, if not sustainably farmed does have negative impacts, however if it's sustainably farmed and certified then the palm oil is much more efficient in terms of yield than any of the other alternative oils available. It's a well-known example but due to misinformation people jumped on the alternative oils which can be much more environmentally damaging and, in some instances, less efficient. Taking palm oils off the shelf overnight just pushed the problem further down the line.

Q.

As a leader in sustainability, what would you say are the top three key drivers for your industry?

Firstly, I would say it's a journey that's constantly evolving, so it's important to make incremental changes. It's about progress over perfection, so you have to just keep moving and don't be scared by the unknown. Secondly, it's about putting people first because consumers hold the power. To stay relevant and stay ahead consumer needs need to be understood and met in the most sustainable way. And thirdly, it's about bridging the capability gap within the company, so that everyone shares the same vision. You need the whole organisation to be aligned on where we need to be because you cannot do it alone.

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