



Leaders Making a Difference

INTERVIEW SERIES REPORT | 2025 EDITION

dss⁺

Protect. Transform. Sustain.



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The best way to
predict the future
is to create it.

Peter Drucker

In an era where the global landscape is rapidly evolving, the role of leadership has never been more critical.

The **"Leaders Making a Difference, 2025"** interview series offers a compelling glimpse into the minds of visionary leaders who are driving transformative change across various industries.

These leaders are not only navigating their organisations through complex challenges but are also setting new benchmarks for sustainability, innovation, and inclusivity. Through their stories, we gain valuable insights into the principles and practices that define effective leadership in today's dynamic world.

The interviews featured in this series span a diverse range of sectors, from sustainability and technology to health and safety, and beyond. Each leader brings a unique perspective shaped by their personal experiences, professional journeys, and the specific challenges of their industries.

A seasoned professional and an experienced leader, **Cédric Parentelli, Managing Director at dss⁺ is this year's Ambassador** for the dss⁺ Leaders Making a Difference initiative. Cédric's approach to leadership is deeply rooted in the principles of teamwork, happiness, and the ability to win hearts and minds. His insights provide a valuable blueprint for navigating large-scale transformation projects and fostering a culture of genuine engagement and resilience.

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I am delighted to invite you to explore the "Leaders Making a Difference, 2025" interview series. This collection of interviews showcases the experiences, insights, and wisdom of visionary leaders who are driving transformative change across various industries. Their stories of resilience, innovation, and leadership provide a roadmap for navigating the complexities of today's dynamic world.

Through these interviews, you will gain valuable perspectives on sustainability, the power of technology, and the importance of inclusive leadership. The openness and authenticity of these leaders offer a realistic and comprehensive view of what it takes to lead effectively in our modern era.

I am deeply appreciative of the time and effort each interviewee has invested in sharing their journeys. Their dedication to making a positive difference is evident and commendable. It is leaders like them who inspire meaningful change and encourage others to strive for excellence.

I invite you to read these interviews and be inspired by the remarkable stories and insights they contain. Together, we can learn from their experiences and apply their lessons to our own leadership journeys.

Cédric Parentelli

Managing Director, dss⁺

Leaders Making a Difference Ambassador 2025



Leaders making a difference, 2025



Cédric Parentelli

Managing Director, dss+

This year’s **Ambassador for the dss+ Leaders Making a Difference initiative**, Cédric Parentelli, discusses his thoughts on why he believes teamwork, happiness and the ability to win hearts and minds are go-to leadership attributes.

 Find **Cédric Parentelli** on LinkedIn



Why do you feel it’s important to continue to share experiences that highlight the benefits and challenges of leadership roles?

Sharing both good and poor experiences, as well as the challenges we all face at some point in our journey, helps everyone to learn, develop and progress. Certainly, whatever leadership role you are in, you first need to win the hearts and minds of team members. If people understand what you are trying to achieve, why it is important and how it contributes to the bigger picture, they will be more invested in their role and feel a sense of fulfilment for the work accomplished. A happier and more involved workforce achieves much better results for the team, the department and, ultimately, the organisation. Leadership engagement plays a fundamental role in achieving this.

However, the ability to win hearts and minds doesn’t always come naturally. Leaders often start out with great intentions, but things don’t always run smoothly. Particularly if the time and effort aren’t taken to understand what makes a team tick, or what makes them happy in their role. Sharing our experiences helps us recognise that, even if we have the greatest intentions, people may see things in a different way. So, it’s important to continue to work on the personal skillsets that make us better leaders and be open to learning from different ideas and experiences.



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You’ve led some large-scale transformation projects. What lessons can you pass on to others looking to take on such a role, and what are the critical skill sets required?

I’ve learned that taking the time to listen to people is the most essential skill set. We don’t always have to, or should, agree on everything with everyone, but giving the opportunity to allow people to express their opinions is key. Listening and understanding someone else’s position is vital to move a project forward. Team members need to have the confidence and space to express any concerns, frustrations and feelings. Helping to overcome any fears or just being present and listening is often all it takes.

The second skill is learning to be yourself and not trying to be someone you are not. Personality clashes within a team can occur, but if you are genuine and honest people will come to value who you are.

It’s also essential to acknowledge personal weaknesses. Large-scale transformation projects often present situations in which different countries and cultures are involved. I’ve found that apologising in advance for any actions or words that lack cultural awareness helps reduce any misunderstandings or tensions early. Don’t underestimate the power of being genuine and authentic when you need to diffuse tricky situations.

Q Where do you stand on learning from failure and how important is it for leaders to develop the right level of resilience to face the knocks and shocks they are likely to encounter?

Firstly, I'm not a fan of focusing on failure. I prefer to put the emphasis on learning fast from mistakes made. Just because something doesn't work immediately doesn't mean we should throw ideas in the rubbish bin and label them as failures. When you embark on any large-scale project, the roadmap should act as a guide not an exact blueprint. So when a process doesn't go exactly as planned, we need to pause and take a breath. What can we learn? What ideas do team members have? How can we put things back on track? Sometimes, just a tweak or adjustment is needed. It's not always about scrapping the project and starting again. But it is important to keep the end goal in mind, making small shifts and adjusting fast. A team will always be more successful if it is encouraged to focus on the ultimate goal.

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Success can't be achieved without people.

In terms of helping to face the inevitable knocks and shocks, careful front-end planning adds enormous value. However, there must be a balance between too little and too much planning. When we embark on any business transformation programme or large-scale project, there needs to be room to adjust along the way. This is more difficult when we over-design plans or don't plan enough. It's about getting that balance right.

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Is performance as a measure of leadership success still relevant? If not, how should success be measured?

Success can't be achieved without people. There is no "I" in team for a reason. A good result is down to how you lead, empower, and trust the team. No one person has all the answers, and each project will have different objectives. As a leader, you may be able to articulate those objectives, but to lead a team you need to adopt an approach that builds on the strengths of individual team members, rather than pointing out weaknesses.

Personally, I have always found empowerment and trust much more effective than micro-management. That doesn't mean you can't give constructive feedback to individuals, but you need to do so in a positive way that instils the confidence to grow. Find a person's sweet spot and encourage them to improve and develop their professional potential. This ability to mobilise and energise your team to meet set objectives is the true measure of good leadership. When a team is happy, they will support you even in the most challenging situations.

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When individuals have the same objective they no longer work in isolation, they work for each other. This is the most productive way to improve outcomes.

Q

Finally, what key takeaways would you give to those looking to strengthen and improve their leadership skills?

One of the best pieces of advice I can give is to focus on teamwork. When individuals have the same objective they no longer work in isolation, they work for each other. This is the most productive way to improve outcomes. Also when mistakes happen, don't play the blame game. A good leader will support individuals so they learn fast when things don't go exactly to plan.

Giving a team confidence and empowering them to make decisions is a better learning platform than requiring them to cascade every decision up to the top. Equally important is being open to questions and debate that help them make the right decisions and take the right actions. This includes acknowledging when things are not working, taking a pause to understand why, and resetting before moving on. Having the courage to take such risks is part of the process for both leaders and team members.



**Read Cedric's
interview online**



www.consultdss.com

Glimpse into the 5 key trends of 2025

To understand how leadership is evolving in practice – not just in theory – we explored 12 interviews with this year's senior women leaders across various industries, totalling over 22,000 words and conducted over 36 hours by dss* global teams. The leaders' insights reveal a shared momentum: a shift away from transactional leadership toward a more purpose-driven, human-centred approach.

From these conversations, **five key themes** emerged that offer a lens into where leadership is headed next—and what organisations must embrace to remain relevant, resilient, and responsible in an increasingly complex world.

1. Cultural transformation through leadership

Organisational culture change is being approached as a long-term, values-driven journey. Effective transformation stems from clear vision, consistent role modelling, and an environment that encourages open dialogue and learning from failure. Leadership is focused on building accountability, promoting safety and ethics, and enabling people to speak up and innovate. Gradual, trust-based changes are proving more effective than top-down mandates, with an emphasis on aligning internal systems with new cultural priorities.

2. Human-centred safety and risk management

Modern safety and risk practices are evolving from a compliance mindset to a commitment-based culture. Organisations are embedding safety into leadership practices, employee engagement, and operational routines. Training is becoming more participatory and peer-led, fostering shared ownership of safety outcomes. Tools such as behaviour-based observations, digital monitoring, and reflective exercises are enhancing awareness. The focus is increasingly on relational leadership, trust-building, and empowering individuals at all levels to take responsibility for risk.

3. Empowering women in male-dominated sectors

There is a growing push to dismantle gender barriers in traditionally male-dominated industries through mentorship, access to leadership roles, and inclusive workplace cultures. Women are being encouraged to pursue technical and leadership positions, driven by a focus on competence, resilience, and collaboration. Empowerment strategies include formal development programmes, visibility of female leaders, and cultural shifts that value diverse thinking and inclusive decision-making, regardless of appearance or background.

4. Sustainability as strategic imperative

Sustainability is no longer treated as a peripheral concern—it has become a central pillar of long-term business strategy. Companies are setting ambitious emissions reduction goals across Scope 1, 2, and 3, while investing in clean energy, circular solutions, and biodiversity protection. Strategic integration of sustainability helps mitigate regulatory, reputational, and financial risks. Success in this area increasingly depends on innovation, proactive risk management, and aligning environmental goals with core business outcomes.

5. Technology and innovation for impact

Innovation is being redefined as a multidimensional driver of business and societal progress. Companies are leveraging AI, data analytics, and digital tools not only for efficiency, but to enable sustainable practices and broaden product applications. Emphasis is shifting from creating new substances to improving the performance and reach of known materials. Innovation efforts now encompass process improvements, new business models, and digital transformation, all rooted in cross-functional and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Each leader's unique perspective highlights the critical role of these trends in driving innovation, fostering inclusivity, and ensuring long-term success in today's dynamic and complex world.

Meet our 2025 interviewees



Read Sara's full interview

Sara Akbar

Chairperson & Chief Executive Officer, Oilserv

KUWAIT ENERGY, OIL & GAS

Born and raised on a Kuwaiti oil field, Sara Akbar's early experiences strongly shaped her career. As a chemical petroleum engineer and one of the first women CEOs in the Arabian oil industry, Sara is passionate about female empowerment, mentoring tomorrow's talent and championing her industry and country. Sara talks to dss+ about how determination, transparency and going the extra mile have helped support her journey



Read Elim's full interview

Elim Sritaba

Chief Sustainability Officer, Asia Pulp & Paper (APP)

INDONESIA INDUSTRIAL & MANUFACTURING

Elim's three-decade career has taken her from finance to forestry to sustainability. In that time, she has learned that true leadership comes from active listening, understanding different perspectives and having the confidence to drive change even in the face of challenges.



Read Wendi's full interview

Wendi Bains

Chief Safety and Sustainability Officer, Fletcher Building

NEW ZEALAND CONSTRUCTION

Wendi Bains, Chief Safety & Sustainability Officer at Fletcher Building, discusses the company's journey to a world-class safety culture. Following a reassessment after a series of fatalities, Fletcher Building shifted from compliance to commitment, empowered line-led safety, and achieved a remarkable 90% reduction in serious injuries.



Read Tina's full interview

Tina Van Hoecke

Global Senior Channel Manager Organised Chains, Arla Foods

GERMANY FOOD & BEVERAGE

Tina Van Hoecke, Global Senior Channel Manager Organised Chains for Arla Foods, possesses extensive experience, an open mindset, and a passion for the foodservice industry. Tina explains why she thrives in a dynamic, challenging, and exciting international environment and how resilience and cultural collaboration are key to shaping the future, driving value, and bringing solutions to organised chains.



Read Retno's's full interview

Retno Nartani

Director, Health, Safety and Environment, Golden Energy Mines

INDONESIA METALS & MINING

Fuelled by curiosity and a passion for learning, Retno has launched herself into the male-dominated mining industry in Indonesia over three decades ago. Today, she is a fearless advocate of safety; and hopes to inspire the next generation through thoughtful guidance and mentorship.



Read Daniela's full interview

Daniela Mediolli

Vice-president, SADA Group

BRAZIL TRANSPORTATION

Driven by a quest for greater efficiency and a sharp focus on transforming organisational culture, Daniela serves as the Vice-president of Grupo SADA, overseeing various strategic areas and supporting over 30 companies within the Group.



Read Virginie's full interview

Virginie Le Barbu

Global Sustainability Director, International Markets, Lenovo

📍 SWITZERLAND 🏭 TECHNOLOGY

Virginie Le Barbu is on a mission to convert as many people as possible into sustainability champions to accelerate the adoption of more sustainable business models and practices. Here Virginie shares her expertise and insights, discussing the role of the technology industry to drive global sustainability initiatives that will help ensure a more sustainable future.



Read Sara's full interview

Sara Peña Astorquia

Sustainability Director, Zelestra

📍 SPAIN 🏭 POWER & UTILITIES

For Sara Peña Astorquia, sustainability represents a way of understanding life and how the world should work. Now as Sustainability Director at Zelestra, an energy company on a mission to make decarbonisation a reality, Sara explains how empathy, communication, and international outlook have combined to ensure sustainability programmes make a lasting impact.



Read Mar's full interview

Mar Perrote

Global Head of Health, Safety, Environment and Quality (HSEQ), Moeve

📍 SPAIN 🏭 ENERGY / CHEMICALS

From managing complex industrial assets to leading cultural transformation projects, Mar Perrote is an enthusiastic advocate of multiculturalism, a mindset that has seen her work in five countries across three continents. Now, as a Global Head of Health, Safety, Environment and Quality (HSEQ) at Moeve, the new brand of the former company Cepsa, she talks to dss+ about drawing on her international experience to drive meaningful change.



Read Anna's full interview

Anna Swaithe

Chief Sustainability Officer, The Crown Estate

📍 UNITED KINGDOM 🏭 PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

A focus on ethical values, a clear ability to strategise and a passion for putting people and planet before profits have helped guide Anna Swaithe to her current position as Chief Sustainability Officer at The Crown Estate. Now working for an organisation responsible for a prime city and substantial rural portfolio, as well as the seabed and half the foreshore around England, Wales and Northern Ireland, Anna explains why being prepared to step into the boots of others and doughnut economics can help improve sustainability goals.



Read Pinar's full interview

Pinar Çağdaş Duran

Technical Safety Director, Tüpraş

📍 TURKEY ENERGY 🏭 OIL & GAS

With a background in chemical engineering, Pinar Çağdaş Duran's career has been shaped by a mission to raise the bar on safety. As Technical Safety Director at Tüpraş, she tells dss+ how a team approach and a focus on leadership qualities is the best platform for achieving higher safety standards.



Read Linda's full interview

Dr. Linda Wu

Director at Shanghai Innovation Center and Technical Director of Electronics & Industrial Division, DuPont

📍 CHINA 🏭 CHEMICALS

At the intersection of science and innovation, Dr. Linda Wu has dedicated over two decades to pushing boundaries with relentless curiosity and passion for innovation. Her mission is to translate science into innovation that can make meaningful societal impact. From photovoltaics to electronic materials, from R&D to sustainable transformation, Dr. Wu embodies the ethos of "Science for Good".

5 key trends of 2025

Leadership is evolving beyond profit and performance toward purpose, people, and planet.

Today's leaders are expected to champion sustainability, foster inclusive cultures, and drive innovation while building trust and resilience. Insights from senior executives across industries reveal a shared shift: leadership is becoming more human-centered, values-driven, and future-focused. From these conversations, five key trends emerged – offering a clear view of how leadership is adapting to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. →



Cultural transformation through leadership

Cultural transformation has become a cornerstone of long-term organisational change, especially in the face of rapid technological, environmental, and generational shifts. Leadership today is no longer about authority—it is about values, trust, and modelling the behaviours needed for resilient, innovative, and inclusive organisations. According to Gallup's 2023 State of the Workplace report, 70% of variance in team engagement is directly attributable to the quality of leadership. Moreover, companies that actively foster strong cultures see employee retention rates that are 40% higher than those that don't.^{1,1}

This link between leadership and cultural change is echoed throughout the interviews. Daniela Medioli, Vice President of Grupo SADA in Brazil, illustrates the long-term nature of transformation: "The most profound and lasting transformations take at least five years," she notes. Her approach is grounded in values—moving from a top-down command model to one based on respect, collaboration, and shared outcomes. Medioli's success has included restructuring governance, aligning 30 companies, and creating formal structures for social responsibility, all while ensuring leadership continuity and development.

Wendi Bains, Chief Safety and Sustainability Officer at Fletcher Building in New Zealand, further highlights the pivotal role of leadership in shifting from a compliance-driven to a commitment-led safety culture. After a tragic period in which five fatalities occurred within three months, Fletcher Building completely overhauled its approach. Leadership began delivering safety training themselves, shifting ownership away from environmental health and safety teams. Tools like "mirror walks" were introduced, prompting leaders to reflect on and commit to visible, values-based behaviour change.



Companies that actively foster strong cultures see employee retention rates that are 40% higher than those that don't

From a global perspective, Tina Van Hoecke of Arla Foods underscores the power of culture in international operations. "Cultural collaboration is not only valuable but essential," she states, emphasising how diverse voices and inclusive leadership strengthen alignment and engagement across markets. Leaders with open minds, she adds, make more informed decisions and better navigate resistance to change. Arla's transformation includes cross-market alignment on sustainability goals and process excellence, supported by data and AI – but grounded in human-centric leadership.

Statistically, this approach is essential. According to the MIT Sloan Management Review, companies with a high level of cultural adaptability are 3.2 times more likely to be considered high performing by their employees.^{1,2} Yet despite the benefits, only 40% of businesses have defined safety improvement plans, and just 36% regularly use incident learnings to prevent future harm^{1,3} – indicating that cultural transformation remains an area of unrealised potential.

Crucially, as these leaders emphasise, culture cannot be imposed. It must be led through example, encouraged through clear communication, and sustained by consistency. Medioli puts it best: "To really make a difference, you need a clear definition of your values, understand where you want to go, and respect the organisation's pace." In that sense, leadership becomes the most critical lever in shaping cultures that can evolve, endure, and thrive.

^{1,1} <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>

^{1,2} <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/culture-as-a-key-to-success/>

^{1,3} <https://ohsonline.com/articles/2023/12/08/the-secret-to-fortune-500-companies-success-lies-in-a-proactive-safety-culture.aspx>



Human-centered safety and risk management

The modern approach to safety and risk management is undergoing a profound transformation. No longer limited to regulatory checklists and compliance-driven audits, safety culture is increasingly human-centred—rooted in trust, shared responsibility, and proactive leadership. According to the National Safety Council, preventable workplace injuries cost U.S. businesses more than \$167 billion annually, with over 4.5 million medically consulted injuries reported in 2022.^{2.1} Yet only 40% of companies have well-defined safety improvement strategies, and just 36% consistently apply learnings from incidents to prevent recurrence.^{2.2}

Interviewed leaders emphasise that real progress in safety emerges from cultural change led by example—not top-down mandates. Wendi Bains, Chief Safety and Sustainability Officer at Fletcher Building in New Zealand, spearheaded a radical transformation in the company's approach after a tragic cluster of workplace fatalities. Rather than relying solely on environmental health and safety (EHS) professionals, the company empowered all leaders to take ownership of safety. "We started embedding safety into the way people think about their own leadership," Bains explains. Initiatives such as "mirror walks" – where leaders assess their own behaviours – promote self-awareness and values-driven action.

This human-centred shift also includes new methods for engagement and training. For example, Fletcher Building introduced peer-led training and encouraged cross-functional safety conversations that elevate the voices of frontline workers. These strategies create psychological safety – a key driver of incident prevention and reporting. Bains emphasises that risk ownership must extend beyond policies: "Safety happens in the conversations that people have when nobody's watching".

Retno Nartani, Director of Health, Safety, and Environment at Golden Energy Mines, echoes this relational philosophy. With over three decades of experience in Indonesia's mining sector, she has built a culture where safety is seen as a form of respect. Retno shares meals with workers and makes daily site visits, building personal rapport while reinforcing safety protocols. "It's not just about inspections," she notes. "It's about connecting with people and making them feel seen".

Technology plays a supporting role but doesn't replace human leadership. Many companies are now using real-time data dashboards, mobile checklists, and AI-powered predictive analytics to identify risks early. However, both Bains and Nartani stress that these tools must complement, not replace, empathetic leadership and open dialogue.

Moreover, the reputational and operational costs of poor safety performance are rising. According to a 2024 Forbes survey, 62% of consumers say they would stop supporting a company known for mistreating its workers or tolerating unsafe conditions.^{2.3}

Safety and risk management are evolving into integrated, people-first disciplines. Leaders like Bains and Nartani show that real safety improvement requires emotional intelligence, hands-on presence, and consistent communication. By embedding safety into values and everyday interactions, organisations can build not only safer workplaces—but more accountable and resilient cultures.



62% of consumers say they would stop supporting a company known for mistreating its workers or tolerating unsafe conditions

2.1 <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/work/costs/work-injury-costs/>

2.2 <https://ohsonline.com/articles/2023/12/08/the-secret-to-fortune-500-companies-success-lies-in-a-proactive-safety-culture.aspx>

2.3 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bryanrobinson/2024/02/04/workplace-safety-and-well-being-on-the-decline-in-2024-study-shows/>





Empowering women in male-dominated sectors

Breaking down gender barriers in traditionally male-dominated industries—such as mining, oil, and heavy manufacturing—has become a significant focus of modern leadership. Despite some progress, women remain underrepresented in many technical and executive roles. Globally, women make up only 16% of the energy sector workforce, according to the International Energy Agency.^{3.1} In the mining sector, comprehensive gender-disaggregated data is scarce, but studies indicate that women's participation remains limited.^{3.2}

Several leaders interviewed emphasise the importance of creating space for women to thrive not just as participants, but as decision-makers. Sara Akbar, Chairperson and CEO of Oilserv Kuwait—and one of the first female CEOs in the Arabian oil sector—notes, “Being a woman in a male-dominated business meant I had to go the extra mile... I worked long hours to prove myself until I realised I didn't have to prove anything.” She underscores that competence, confidence, and consistency—not conformity—are the real markers of leadership.

Similarly, Retno Nartani, Director of Health, Safety, and Environment at Golden Energy Mines in Indonesia, entered the mining sector more than 30 years ago when female engineers were almost non-existent. She built credibility by learning every aspect of the business and by treating workers with a mix of professionalism and human connection: “Sometimes I cook for them... that helps build trust,” she shares. Retno not only supervises safety operations but also mentors younger team members to grow into their roles.

These stories are more than personal triumphs—they reflect larger structural gaps. While 75% of companies have some kind of gender diversity policy, only 25% of them track and report metrics related to its effectiveness.^{3.3} Moreover, only 40% of women in STEM fields say they have equal opportunities for promotion, compared to 70% of men.^{3.4}



Only 40% of women in STEM fields say they have equal opportunities for promotion, compared to 70% of men

Despite these imbalances, some organisations are developing practical mechanisms for inclusion. Akbar, for example, created a “Chief of Staff” programme at Kuwait Energy to fast-track young talent, giving both women and men the chance to shadow the CEO and make executive-level decisions. This initiative has accelerated the careers of more than a dozen individuals and built a legacy of trust and mentorship.

Meanwhile, at DuPont, Dr. Linda Wu promotes female leadership through example. As the Technical Director for DuPont China, she points out that their CEO, CTO, and CFO are all women. “Women are particularly strong at balancing planning, execution, and empathy,” she says, advocating for more female voices in innovation-driven industries.

The consistent theme across these narratives is that gender equity is not about tokenism—it's about changing the structures, habits, and attitudes that shape career opportunities. Empowering women requires mentorship, visibility, and a workplace culture that rewards capability over conformity. These leaders are showing that not only can women thrive in male-dominated sectors—they can transform them.



Sustainability as strategic imperative

Sustainability is now entrenched as a strategic business priority, not merely a compliance requirement. According to the Global Reporting Initiative, 96% of the world's top 250 companies now report on their sustainability practices. Moreover, 66% of the annual revenue of the Global 2000 companies is now covered by net-zero targets.^{4.1} This shift demonstrates that long-term resilience, investor confidence, and brand reputation are tightly linked to environmental and social performance.

Interview insights strongly reinforce this trend. Elim Sritaba, Chief Sustainability Officer at APP Group, emphasises that balancing business performance and sustainability means showing stakeholders the risks of inaction. “I highlight the regulatory, reputational and financial losses if we don't act,” she explains. Her team didn't wait for perfect solutions—they implemented energy efficiency improvements and launched a biomass-powered mill while planning for broader renewable transitions.

Similarly, Dr. Linda Wu, Director of the DuPont Shanghai Innovation Centre, leads sustainability through a technological lens. Over 80% of DuPont's product portfolio is now tied directly to sustainability, and half of Wu's daily work relates to reducing emissions across Scopes 1, 2, and 3. She stresses the complexity of Scope 3, which spans the entire value chain, requiring careful coordination and innovation in product development and lifecycle planning.

Sara Peña Astorquia, Sustainability Director at Zelestra, adds a critical cultural dimension. She believes sustainability leaders must act as catalysts who inspire long-term thinking in organisations: “It's about shifting the mindset—aligning culture, leadership, and communication to make sustainability an integrated reality.” Zelestra has even launched a leadership programme to empower senior teams to drive environmental and social transformation with confidence.



Sustainability today is more than a green initiative – it's a strategic framework for navigating complex risks and ensuring future viability

Technology and innovation are key enablers in this journey. Arla Foods' Tina Van Hoecke highlights their FarmAhead™ programme, which uses over 200 farm-level data points to monitor emissions and sustainability metrics. Farmers are rewarded for reducing emissions and increasing energy efficiency—illustrating how sustainability and operational excellence go hand in hand.

Still, many companies struggle to move beyond pledges. Only 16% of Global 2000 companies are currently on track to meet their 2050 net-zero goals.^{4.2} Interviewees acknowledge this reality, with Wu noting that “perfection is the enemy of good” and progress comes through consistent iteration, not rigid planning.

Sustainability today is more than a green initiative—it's a strategic framework for navigating complex risks and ensuring future viability. Leaders like Sritaba, Wu, Peña Astorquia, and Van Hoecke exemplify how embedding sustainability across operations, technology, and culture is becoming a defining leadership challenge – and opportunity – for the next generation of global businesses.

3.1 <https://www.iea.org/reports/world-energy-employment-2023>

3.2 <https://www.ilo.org/industries-and-sectors/mining-coal-other-mining-sector>

3.3 <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>

3.4 <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/01/09/women-in-stem-see-more-gender-disparities-at-work-especially-those-in-computer-jobs-majority-male-workplaces/>

4.1 <https://zerotracker.net/analysis/new-analysis-half-of-worlds-largest-companies-are-committed-to-net-zero>

4.2 <https://www.esgdrive.com/news/16-percent-g2000-companies-on-track-net-zero-progress-2050-targets-accenture-report/732974/>



Technology and innovation for impact

Technology and innovation have become central to strategy, sustainability, and business model evolution across industries. Companies that invest in innovation significantly outperform their peers. According to WorldMetrics, organisations that invest in digital transformation are 26% more profitable than their industry peers, and 81% of digital leaders report increased profitability as a result of their digital transformation efforts.^{5.1}

Dr. Linda Wu, Technical Director of DuPont China and Director at the DuPont Shanghai Innovation Center, exemplifies this shift. She views innovation not just as invention but as a way to apply known materials more effectively across multiple industries. "Perfection is the enemy of good," she explains, advocating for continuous improvement over idealised, slow-moving innovation models. Over 80% of DuPont's product portfolio now directly contributes to sustainability goals. Her approach is practical—modifying proven, safe materials for broader applications, including in electronics and photovoltaics, while reducing carbon emissions throughout the value chain.

Wu also emphasises interdisciplinary thinking. "Material scientists need to understand application scenarios," she says, noting that engineers must now bridge chemistry, mechanical systems, and software. This collaborative approach is echoed in her leadership of product development that incorporates safety, environmental stewardship, and market readiness simultaneously.

Similarly, Tina Van Hoecke, Global Senior Channel Manager for Arla Foods, describes how the company's FarmAhead™ programme leverages real-time data and AI to optimise emissions, feed use, and farm-level energy efficiency. The programme tracks over 200 data points per farm and rewards farmers for sustainable practices. "Sustainability and operational excellence are no longer separate conversations," Van Hoecke says. "They're the same goal achieved through digitalisation and innovation."

However, the path is not without challenges. The World Economic Forum warns that while AI can enhance productivity and insight, it can also lead to increased energy usage and emissions if not managed properly. In fact, training large AI models can emit up to 626,000 pounds of CO₂—equivalent to the lifetime emissions of five American cars.^{5.2}

Leaders in the interviews agree that innovation must be inclusive and adaptable. Wu highlights DuPont's cultural rituals such as "Dead Project Day" to celebrate failed experiments—a symbol of the company's tolerance for risk and learning. Similarly, Sara Peña Astorquia at Zelestra emphasises that innovation must be aligned with clear communication and long-term purpose. "Without cultural alignment," she explains, "technology remains underused and disconnected from business strategy."

Innovation today is measured not by novelty alone but by its relevance, applicability, and ethical impact. As shown by DuPont and Arla Foods, the organisations making the most progress are those that integrate technology, sustainability, and cultural openness into one coherent innovation strategy.



81% of digital leaders report increased profitability as a result of their digital transformation efforts

What's Next

The future of purpose-driven leadership

As global businesses emerge from an era marked by climate urgency, digital disruption, and shifting employee expectations, a new leadership paradigm is taking shape. Recent trends – from embedding sustainability into strategy to rethinking cultural transformation – point toward a future that values integrity over image, systems thinking over silos, and humanity over hierarchy.

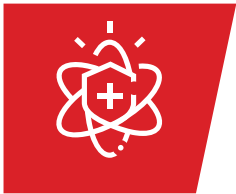
So, what's next for leaders navigating this evolution? The answer lies in deepening the five foundational shifts already underway: regenerative sustainability, culture as a strategic lever, inclusive leadership, systemic innovation, and holistic safety.



Regenerative business models will replace sustainable minimums

The next chapter in sustainability won't be defined by less harm – it will be defined by net-positive action. Businesses are beginning to move beyond emissions reduction to restoring ecosystems, enhancing biodiversity, and supporting community resilience. This regenerative approach means aligning core operations with environmental and social value creation.

What's more, climate accountability is being built into financial governance. Expect to see sustainability metrics integrated with quarterly reporting, increased use of internal carbon pricing, and adoption of climate scenario analysis as a strategic tool. Companies that act now will gain not only reputational strength but investor confidence.



Culture will become the operating system of strategy

Culture is no longer a background element - it's the connective tissue that determines how strategy is executed. In the coming years, we'll see organisations treating culture with the same rigor as finance or operations.

This means regular measurement of cultural health using behavioural data, digital engagement tools, and team network analysis. Leaders will invest in values-based development programmes, empower informal influencers, and use culture as a lever to boost trust, retention, and innovation—especially in hybrid and cross-cultural workforces.



In the coming years, we'll see organisations treating culture with the same rigor as finance or operations



Inclusive leadership will become a core competency

The focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion is shifting from optics to infrastructure. Representation alone is no longer enough. The organisations that thrive next will embed inclusion into how decisions are made, who gets visibility, and which voices influence strategy.

Inclusive leadership will be a standard competency evaluated in performance reviews, promotion criteria, and succession planning. It's not just the right thing to do—it's a strategic imperative that enhances innovation, resilience, and ethical governance.



Innovation will be judged by systemic and ethical impact

Innovation is no longer defined by novelty—it's judged by relevance, responsibility, and reach. As technology reshapes every industry, the companies leading the way will be those solving systemic problems, not just optimising for efficiency.

Cross-industry collaboration, ethical oversight in R&D, and innovation labs aligned with social purpose will become the norm. Mission-driven innovation frameworks – like those focused on food security, climate adaptation, or health equity – will guide investment in technology that serves people and the planet.



The organisations that thrive next will embed inclusion into how decisions are made, who gets visibility, and which voices influence strategy



Safety will expand to include wellbeing and psychological trust

Safety is evolving beyond physical incident prevention to encompass emotional and mental wellbeing. The most forward-thinking organisations are already measuring trust, burnout, and peer dynamics as leading indicators of safety and performance.

Technological tools like real-time dashboards, wearable sensors, and predictive analytics will aid this shift—but they are no substitute for empathetic leadership. A culture where people feel safe to speak up, slow down, and support each other is the foundation of long-term excellence.

Toward a more conscious model of leadership

The next era of leadership will not be defined by titles, pedigree, or even technical expertise. It will be defined by coherence – by how well leaders align purpose with action, values with strategy, and profit with impact. The emerging model of leadership is deeply conscious, systems-oriented, and grounded in human dignity.

This evolution is being driven not just by regulation or reputation, but by necessity. Climate change, geopolitical volatility, shifting labour markets, and rising stakeholder expectations demand a new playbook—one that views resilience and responsibility not as trade-offs, but as dual engines of progress.

In this future, the most admired organisations will be those that take a stand—not just on sustainability or diversity, but on how business can serve as a force for good. Leadership will be measured not only by what is built, but by who is lifted. Decision-making will shift from extractive logic to regenerative thinking. Companies will be valued not just for what they do, but for how they do it, and why.

This shift also requires courage. Purpose-driven leadership is not about perfect answers—it's about transparent experimentation, collaborative problem-solving, and the humility to listen, learn, and adapt. It's about fostering cultures where people feel safe to challenge norms, where failure is reframed as learning, and where progress is collective.

The leaders shaping this future will be those who can hold both complexity and clarity. They will navigate ambiguity with empathy, drive innovation with ethics, and respond to global risks with local understanding. They will know that sustainable performance isn't just about hitting KPIs – it's about building institutions that people trust, ecosystems that endure, and legacies that matter.



dss* is grateful to all our 2025 interviewees, who embody this shift in action. They represent not just a change in how business is done, but a deeper evolution in how business is understood – with purpose, consciousness, and impact at its core.



About dss⁺

dss⁺ is the operational transformation partner for complex and high-hazard industries. Driven by our purpose, we help organisations achieve breakthroughs in safety, performance, and sustainability that deliver measurable impact and build business endurance.

Forged in the high-pressure world of safety, we know that people are the true success factor for lasting change. That's why we work from the inside – engaging deeply within organisations to shift mindsets, shape cultures, and establish the capabilities needed from the frontline to the boardroom.

We combine technical expertise and operational experience with a people-centred, data-driven approach to deliver transformative outcomes for our clients. Together, we tackle the toughest challenges and deliver results that truly matter; saving lives and creating a more sustainable future.

Find out more at www.consultdss.com



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