



# Women in Leadership Interview

**While it is perceived that there are many structural and other barriers that limit women's progress through the ranks in energy management, we would like to explore a different question: how have the women who have made it to the very top in energy management overcome those barriers?**

**Anna Dowson, Group Head of Energy at Tesco takes us through the journey of pushing her career boundaries and finding the balance to rise to the prominence in energy management.**



## What is your personal story?

I have always been a huge admirer of the built environment and in my final year in school I simply could not make up my mind whether I wanted to be

an architect or an engineer. My indecision was such that I ended up doing both (through an MEng degree in Architecture and Environmental Design). Those 4 years were more than enough to make me realise that I was hard-wired as an engineer (despite my best attempts to nurture my inner architect) but it also made me incredibly aware of the impact that buildings have on the environment.

And so, I started my professional career in a multi-disciplinary engineering consultancy, only to face into the recession following the financial crisis of 2008. With a shrinking construction industry, I decided to go back into academia, successfully pursuing an Engineering Doctorate focusing

on the discrepancies between predicted and actual energy performance of buildings. That was the pivotal moment in my journey towards a career in energy management.

One of the biggest (personal) takeaways from my research was that it almost didn't matter how well a building was designed, if it was poorly operated, all of your efforts as a designer went down the drain. And that light bulb moment triggered my desire to move away from design into an operational energy management role. And what better place to start that journey than with the UK's biggest food retailer (responsible for just under 1% of the UK's electricity consumption)?

### What does your role entail?

As the Group Head of Energy for Tesco, I'm responsible for setting the strategy to reduce our energy consumption and associated spend, ensuring increases in energy prices are fully mitigated. In doing so, I manage a team of 5 energy managers, 1 water manager, 3 field engineers and 10 analysts. They are the true heroes behind the amazing results we have delivered in the last few years, including an annual reduction in electricity use of 7.5% in 20/21 alone, whilst meeting our 2020 carbon reduction targets 1 year early.

As part of my role, I'm also responsible for ensuring we meet the ambitious carbon reduction targets associated with property portfolio. Tesco has a long-standing ambition to become net-zero carbon by 2050, and following the Paris Agreement, we conducted a thorough review of our targets and plans. As a result of this review, we set ourselves new and more aggressive science-based targets, in line with a 1.5°C warming trajectory. This translates to ambitious energy efficiency targets coupled with a shift towards renewable electricity sources (both on and off-site). More recently, I am also leading our strategy to support the business' plans for fleet electrification, charging infrastructure for customer EVs, automation of our fulfilment centres and heating decarbonisation.

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### Did you always know where you wanted to be professionally at this stage?

As soon as I joined Tesco as an International Energy Manager, I had my eyes set on the Head of Energy role. I could not imagine a more exciting and fulfilling role, leading a team of brilliant energy managers to deliver meaningful and positive change, not only for the environment but also to the business' profitability. What I did not expect was to be given the opportunity to take on the role

at such a young age (I had just turned 30 when I was promoted).

### What is your leadership style, and how did you develop your leadership confidence and voice?

I was very much 'catapulted' into a leadership role, without having had much prior experience in managing a team. This was undoubtedly a daunting process, but surely one of great self-discovery. I'm quite a 'bubbly' person and thrive in collaborative, honest and energetic environments. Initially, I was concerned that these traits were not conducive of strong leadership, perhaps due to a lack of role models that I could identify myself with. I could have tried to 'dial down' my natural style, but instead I chose to tap into it, building strong and genuine

relationships with my team and key stakeholders. In doing so, I believe I managed to develop a deep sense of empowerment and motivation amongst my team.

During my first year in role, I had the opportunity to take part in an 'Insights' personal profiling exercise. I found this to be incredibly powerful (and eerily accurate). I would highly recommend this (or similar tools such as Myers & Briggs) as a means of gaining further insights into

your strengths, blind-spots and opportunities for development. For me, a key area I needed to focus on was my confidence,

especially when seeking to resolve tough issues. In part, my confidence grew with time as I started to prove to myself (and others) that I was indeed qualified and competent enough to do my job (and do it well). Yet, I feel that I had to consciously push myself out of my comfort zone, and with every successful attempt at braving uncharted waters, my confidence grew, bit by bit. I do still have quite a lot of 'mind-talk' and will occasionally question my worth, so I must admit this is an area I will just need to keep working on.

### What are, from your perspective, the biggest challenges for women in energy management leadership roles?

As with most careers that require some level of technical expertise, I think the shortage of role models is one of the biggest barriers.



I believe that role models are crucial in motivating those in the earlier stages of their career but also from an even earlier age. How many young girls aspire to be engineers whilst still in school? Perhaps a decision early on not to pursue subjects such as maths or physics could prevent talented girls from entering into a technical career later on. That is not to say that formal technical qualification is a pre-requisite to a career in energy management, but I do

I read a study once stating that most women will not apply for a job unless they meet 100% of the requirements, whilst the same did not apply for most men. I truly believe that this is one of the biggest reasons why we don't see enough women in leadership roles. Which leads me back to the lack of role models - could more role models enthuse further confidence in women, nudging them to take a chance on that job that feels just out of reach?

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believe that a minimum level of technical knowledge is required for the relevant industry you would be looking to work in. Perhaps, even an expectation that a technical degree would be required, could be a barrier to more women entering (and progressing) in the field of energy management.

**What can women do to overcome these challenges or to change these situations?**

In my opinion, successful energy managers need to have strong collaborative skills to operate cross-functionally and leverage the support required to deliver savings to the business.

Studies suggest that women are naturally strong collaborators, which is something I believe should not be underestimated. When coupled with a genuine purpose and determination, effective collaboration skills can be incredibly powerful.

Another powerful ally is curiosity. My thirst for knowledge is truly insatiable and I genuinely think that is one of the attributes that have helped me the most throughout my career. Being curious and inquisitive is a brilliant way to learn both technically and personally.

And finally, building on from the previous question, I think a pinch of courage to take on new challenges is also essential! And this becomes much easier when you have a good support network around you.

**Many people struggle with finding a mentor or support to help them in their career journey. Did you ever receive any form of support or mentoring as you moved along?**

Absolutely, and I personally do not think I would have made it this far without the support of my mentors (as well as my family). As I mentioned earlier, confidence does not come easy to me so at each of the big cross-roads in my career, I very much relied on my support network to remind me that “I could do it!” Having someone to nudge you out of your comfort zone, helping you focus on your strongest qualities whilst managing your blind spots and also helping you learn from your mistakes, is crucial.





**What about training? For those who want to be leaders, do you advise that they get any formal training on how to lead?**

As far as leadership skills go, I feel that I learned them mostly on the job. I did have some training sessions through my employer and many of them were very insightful (I particularly benefitted from training around ‘tough conversation’ and ‘coaching’). Yet nothing replaces the real-world dynamics and interactions with your team and stakeholders. Reflecting and learning at every possible opportunity is also key.

If I had to pick a single area of focus it would be self-awareness. Learning about your own strengths and weaknesses, and how to manage them, is probably the best use of your time and effort. This will enable you to grow into an authentic & credible leader.

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**Looking back, what three pieces of advice do you have for your younger self?**

- Believe in yourself and surround yourself with people who believe in you too.
- Don't feel that you have to change who you are to fit into the 'stereotypical' leadership profile. But do be mindful that your kindness can be perceived as weakness.
- Embrace your curiosity and 'geekiness' - they will get you far!

**What are your long-term plans professionally?**

I cannot imagine a world where I do not work in Energy Management and/or Sustainability. My medium-term plans are to continue growing my knowledge and influence to deliver even more ambitious energy and carbon savings to Tesco.

After that I suppose I'll have to strive for world-domination? I joke, but the reality is I am yet to find a job out there that would excite me enough to make me want to leave my current role.

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- 21th Turning Data into Energy Savings
- 27th Understanding and Delivering Behavioural Change
- 28th Essential HVAC Control and Optimisation

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- 9th Waste Management
- 10-11th Energy Management in Building Services
- 17th Water Management
- 24-25th Fundamentals of Energy Management

**REDUCED PRICES**

### Knowledge and Skills Gap Analysis Interview

Understanding of a range of energy management competencies is required for professionals to effectively manage organisation's energy cost and consumption, monitoring and reporting energy use, as well as meeting energy efficiency requirements. The EMA can assess your knowledge and skills through the Knowledge and Skills Gap Analysis Interview. The Interview is an informal 60-minute conversation that concludes with a feedback on how to progress your professional development and advance your career.

### Group Training

All courses can be delivered to teams or groups of stakeholders from the same organisation or industry in a standard format, or as tailored sessions (minimum 6 candidates). For a quote email [jana.skodlova@theema.org.uk](mailto:jana.skodlova@theema.org.uk) with your chosen course title and approximate number of staff. We can also develop new, bespoke material to fit specific client needs.

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**"The course built on all aspects of previous knowledge and added a potential new skill that I did not have before attendance."**

Energy & Environmental Manager - Celtic Manor Collection

**"It was informative, useful and given confidence to challenge quotes and suppliers."**

Energy Efficiency Manager - Parkwood Leisure