



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. Keira McLuskey, Head of Sustainability for Network Rail (Scotland) shares her career journey so far.



What is your personal story?

About three quarters of the way through my geography degree, I knew that environmental science was where my real interest lay so I immediately signed up for a post graduate diploma in environmental management. I chose the diploma over the Masters because it offered a six-week industry placement and I thought my CV needed some experience other than working in video shops and cinemas!

I finished my exams on the Friday and started at Halcrow (now Jacobs) as an environmental auditor the following Monday morning. I had a couple of different roles, but I worked on Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessments auditing and CEEQUAL assessments.

I moved to Network Rail in 2013 to take up a role as Environment specialist, covering all of Scotland. At that point, environmental management was very much a poor cousin to health and safety and sustainability was not a well-known discipline.

My first year at Network Rail was a baptism of fire but I loved my role as I was given the autonomy to choose what to focus my time and efforts on and could see so much potential for growth and positive change – both in myself and in the business.

After a couple of years, it became clear that if I wanted a more senior

role then, I would need to move to our HQ in Milton Keynes, broaden out to Health and Safety or go elsewhere. But I was driven by the challenge and loved seeing the month-on-month improvements so I got my head down and stayed put.

I got my first shot at management when I took up a secondment with ScotRail and managed a team across both Network Rail and ScotRail. My main objective was to merge the teams to achieve common goals. I learned a lot but was not successful in gaining the permanent position and at that point 9 months pregnant, so after some maternity leave went back to my old role.

I had got a taste for leadership though and so did a couple of courses and went about trying to convince my organisation that they needed senior sustainability roles. It was a long slog but with a little help from Greta Thunberg and David Attenborough,

encouragement from my line manager and a progressive managing director, I created a team structure, wrote a strategy and convinced our Executive team, it wasn't really a choice.

I successfully interviewed for my current role the day before my second child arrived in the world and now manage a team of 11 with an aim to deliver the Scotland's Railway sustainability strategy.

What does your role entail?

Other than spending far too much time in Teams meetings, I provide regular leadership and direction to Scotland's Railway Executive and wider business on sustainability issues to meet legal targets, stakeholder expectations and internal objectives, drive continual improvement and deliver a sustainable modern railway for Scotland. I lead a newly established team of eleven specialists, providing motivation, support and guidance to continuously develop and grow the team.

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

No. If I am being completely honest,

I have never been hugely driven by titles, salaries or the number of people working under me - and I'm certainly not following a 10-year plan! I have focussed on adding value, continual improvement and standing up for what I believe and know is the right thing to do.

I haven't got to where I am through chance though, I have set personal objectives, worked hard and I am driven, but for a sense of satisfaction, for trying to make a positive impact, and doing a job that I enjoy and that I am challenged by.

What is your leadership style?

I am fairly fluid and able to switch between styles as and when the context requires it. In my current role, I have had to establish a new team and I believe my inclusivity has helped people feel valued and confident to speak up. However, we also need to deliver against a lot of regulatory targets and deliver a strategy with demanding timescales so I am also decisive and at times lean towards a more visionary style.

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by many great leaders in my career.

My confidence has grown by watching and learning from others and through seeking feedback and advice from mentors, managers and other colleagues I respect and look up to.

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

This is a big question! Women are hit harder by imposter syndrome which can be hugely debilitating, women are more likely to give up work to become a carer and despite it being 2022 many women's careers suffer when they take time away to start a family. I devalued my own expertise and discipline for a long time and it took a particularly excellent (female) line manager to help me find my voice.

I am very fortunate to work for progressive and fair organisation and was promoted despite being on maternity leave at the time. Many others are overlooked and dismissed – the Pregnant Then Screwed website/ Instagram demonstrates how big the problem is.



Team tree planting day at Govan docklands during COP26



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

We need to support one another and raise each other up. We should open doors for females in junior positions and offer to mentor the less experienced. We also need to challenge the status quo, call out poor behaviour and create targets and policies that include both men and women so we can identify and eliminate barriers for everyone taking leave.

I don't think it is all on women though, we need to lean on our male allies, plus diversity is good for business. If for nothing other than improved performance, organisations should have strategic plans to increase the number of females in their leadership teams.

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?

Years ago, I enrolled in the Women in Rail mentorship scheme, I got paired with a really experienced, confident woman and felt empowered just being in her company. The scheme lasted a year but since then, I've had multiple mentors and can't recommend it enough. Some have been one-off sessions and others, like my current mentor, longer term. They have all come about by being pro-active and seeking out guidance and advice from people I look up to and respect.

I always have an objective for what I want to get out of a session, whether it's advice with a specific problem I'm dealing with, general tips from someone that is a leader in that particular area or a tactical session with someone I know who can help open doors for me. In my experience, people have always been happy to assist, and a good leader will always be willing to help others to succeed.

What about training? For those who want to be leaders, do you advise

that they get any formal training on how to lead?

I did ILM3 and would recommend it. I think experience counts for a lot but a formal qualification provides the leadership theory and shows commitment to your learning and development.

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

- What you have to say is important, try to be confident and don't back down.
- Break out of the silos, I know you find networking uncomfortable but it will help you.
- Take your personal development plan seriously, spend time on it writing and actioning it – you absolutely do have time!

What are your long-term plans professionally?

The railway is already the greenest form of public transport but we have committed to the decarbonisation of passenger services by 2035 and to be net zero by 2045.

We need to transition to a circular economy, achieve biodiversity net gain across our estate, create social value and make our railway more robust to the impacts of climate change. There is a lot to be done!

I truly believe that green rail is essential for achieving climate change targets and I hope I can be effective enough, for long enough, to see these goals become a reality.

On a more personal note, I want to grow to be a better leader, I want to further build my network to create and develop new opportunities, I want to innovate and introduce smart, green technology and I want to get to the bottom of my inbox each week!