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'Get out from behind your screen, our industry is ultimately about people'

This week Women in Solar+ Europe gives voice to Kim Keats, Partner at Spain's Ekon Strategy Consulting. "There is no substitute for speaking to colleagues, clients, investors, developers, operators and other market participants," he states.

By **Women in Solar+ Europe**
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Kim Keats Martinez | Image: Ekon Strategy Consulting

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The energy transition is forcing us to solve problems that are often complex, interconnected and, in many cases, unprecedented. No individual, company or discipline has all the answers. In that environment, leadership is less about having the right answer yourself and more about creating conditions where the best ideas can emerge from the collective expertise of a team.

For me, inclusive leadership is a decision-making advantage, rather than a social objective. People with different backgrounds, experiences and ways of thinking will often identify risks, opportunities or unintended consequences that others miss. The challenge is ensuring those perspectives are actually heard. If the same voices dominate every discussion, organisations risk becoming less innovative and more vulnerable to blind spots.

Trust, challenge and psychological safety

Psychological safety does not mean avoiding difficult conversations or seeking consensus on everything. It means creating an environment where people can question assumptions, challenge decisions, and raise concerns without fearing negative consequences. If people feel trusted and respected, they are much more likely to contribute honestly, including when they disagree. This ultimately leads to better decisions and stronger organizations.

One lesson I learned relatively early is to think about management as a cycle of trust, responsibility, authority and monitoring. You start by trusting people, giving them meaningful responsibilities and the authority needed to deliver, and then monitoring outcomes to learn and improve together.

What I have also learned is that trust is not just about intentions. It depends on systems. If an organization lacks visibility of individual and team performance, managers may become reluctant to delegate authority, not because they do not trust people, but because they lack the information needed to monitor outcomes effectively. Unfortunately, that can sometimes be interpreted as a lack of trust.

Creating psychological safety therefore requires both the right culture and the right organisational structures. Without both, the cycle breaks down.

Confidence, communication and overlooked voices

I have mixed feelings about this topic. In consulting and other knowledge-based industries, people are ultimately paid for their ideas, judgment and willingness to contribute. Creating opportunities for people to speak is important, but individuals also have some responsibility to make their voices heard.

Over the years, some people have suggested that my communication style can be intimidating or that stronger personalities may unintentionally discourage others from contributing. Whether that perception is fair or not is probably for others to judge. My own view has always been that ideas should be challenged vigorously and that disagreement is often a healthy part of arriving at better decisions.

Where I do think there is a useful lesson is that people communicate very differently. Some people are comfortable with direct debate, while others are not. A leader cannot be expected to adapt perfectly to every individual, but it is worth recognizing that not everyone interprets the same interaction in the same way.

One thing that has always fascinated me is how differently exactly the same behaviour can be perceived depending on who is displaying it. A young professional who challenges assumptions may be seen as arrogant or inexperienced, while a senior executive expressing the same views may be seen as decisive or visionary. The behaviour has not changed; the context has.

Early in my career, I experimented with many different communication styles depending on the manager, organization or situation. In truth, it often made very little difference. People tend to form views about others surprisingly quickly and then interpret subsequent behaviour through that lens.

This is one reason why leaders need to be careful about equating confidence, communication style or seniority with competence. Valuable ideas can come from unexpected places, and organizations perform better when they evaluate arguments on their merits rather than on the profile of the person making them.

Leadership is a two-way process

For professionals who may feel intimidated to contribute in environments where they are underrepresented or where there are strong hierarchies, my advice would be to contribute anyway. Ask questions, challenge assumptions respectfully and be willing to put ideas forward, even if they are not ultimately accepted. No organization benefits when people self-censor because they assume their views will not matter.

At the same time, leadership is a two-way process. Employees have a responsibility to contribute, but leaders have a responsibility to listen and explain decisions. Not every idea can or should be implemented, but people deserve to understand why.

In my experience, people are far more willing to accept disagreement than they are to accept being ignored. Some of the best leaders I have worked with were not those who agreed with me most often, but those who took ideas seriously, challenged them openly and explained their reasoning. That creates trust, even when the answer is ultimately "no".

I am probably not the best person to comment on every aspect of leadership within large organisations because a significant part of my career has been spent working independently. In fact, one reason I chose that path was that I often found corporate politics and organisational bureaucracy frustrating.

That said, organizations should be careful about defining "leader material" too narrowly. Different situations require different styles. Some leaders are charismatic and highly visible. Others lead through expertise, judgement or the ability to build consensus around difficult decisions. In a sector as complex as the energy transition, there is room for many different forms of leadership, and organisations benefit when they recognise and value that diversity.

The future of leadership in the Solar+ industries

If I had to choose one capability, it would probably be judgement. Information is becoming increasingly abundant and accessible. New technologies, including artificial intelligence, will make it easier than ever to analyze data, generate reports and access knowledge. However, knowing what information to trust, how to interpret it and how to make decisions under uncertainty will remain fundamentally human skills.

I would also encourage people to remain curious and intellectually honest. The energy transition is evolving rapidly, and nobody has all the answers. The most effective leaders are not necessarily those who always appear certain. They are often the people who continue learning, listen carefully to others and are willing to change their minds when presented with better evidence.

Finally, get out from behind your screen. Our industry is ultimately about people, not just technology, models or spreadsheets. There is no substitute for speaking to colleagues, clients, investors, developers, operators and other market participants.

Leadership itself does not necessarily require formal authority. Some of the most influential people I have worked with have had little formal authority. What they possessed was credibility, expertise, integrity and the ability to build trust. People may comply with authority because they have to, but they tend to follow leadership because they choose to.

In the energy sector, where complex projects often involve collaboration between organizations, disciplines and stakeholders with different objectives, influence frequently matters more than hierarchy. The ability to listen, build relationships, understand different perspectives and bring people together around a common objective can be just as important as any formal title. Leadership is ultimately about enabling progress, and there are many ways to achieve that without relying solely on authority.

Kim Keats Martínez is Partner at K4K Training & Advisory and Ekon Strategy Consulting, an independent advisor specialising in power markets, renewable energy, energy storage and desalination. Based in Spain, he has more than 28 years of international experience in the energy sector, supporting developers, investors, lenders, utilities and fuel suppliers across Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Americas. Throughout his career, Kim has advised on over 78 GW of conventional and renewable generation projects and more than 743 MIGD of desalination capacity, representing approximately \$48 billion of investment value. His work focuses on market analysis, commercial strategy, project due diligence, revenue forecasting and the integration of emerging technologies such as battery energy storage systems. Kim is a frequent speaker at industry conferences and regularly contributes commentary on electricity market design, flexibility, energy storage and the evolving role of renewables in modern power systems. He is based in Madrid and leads assignments throughout Europe and internationally.

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