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Positive leadership

Interview with Ángel Simón Grimaldos

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“Positive leadership requires global vision”

Ángel Simón Grimaldos, Executive Chairman of Agbar, Assistant Managing Director of Suez Environnement and Chairman of Aqualogy

Is a civil engineer graduate of Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña and holder of an MBA in corporate management from Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas (ESADE). In September 2004 he was appointed general manager of the Agbar Group, after working eleven years for the group. In 2006 he led Agbar's first major European transaction in the United Kingdom, with the acquisition of Bristol Water. In 2008 he also took on the position of chief executive officer of Agbar, a position he held until his appointment as chairman. In June 2010, after Suez Environnement took control, he became executive chairman. In March 2013 he was appointed assistant general manager of Suez Environnement, in charge of the water division in Europe. Ángel Simón is also chairman of Aqualogy, the global brand of integrated water solutions for sustainable development.



In these times time of economic turmoil, we should be taking another look at Spain's leadership in the management of natural resources and respect for the environment. What is our current position and to what extent does the present economic scenario affect the resources used in this respect in Spain?

We are at a watershed. Spain has the opportunity to take the path towards and seize the leadership that is needed just now and it should indeed take this opportunity. What we need, above all, is global thinking. Leaders no longer exert influence over a single territory. We are talking about a globalised world where there are no frontiers and where leaders must be aware that the impact of their decisions transcends their own countries. Then we need knowledge: leaders must know what they're talking about but they must also talk about what they do.

It is more important today to act than to speak. Leaders should embody the authority gained from having acted

as is expected of them. They are therefore fully informed to speak and in all cases to share their knowledge with their followers. And, here, sharing means the internet. These days we must always be aware that everything we know and do is immediately shared through the web.

Spain needs to brush itself up a little in this respect if it is to rise to the challenges of attaining leadership. Also, in the field of water resources and the environment we are part of a cutting-edge continent and are therefore a benchmark nation. Irrespective of the growth level of a country or continent, there is no doubt that Europe has benchmark status. However, Spain still has some way to go before it reaches European level. But we have a key tool to achieve this. We have qualified professionals to manage resources. Spain has always had the talent needed for this enterprise; since the end of the nineteenth century we have had highly qualified and capable engineers in this area, numerous prestigious individuals were dedicated to this task in the twentieth century and currently, we can safely say that the generation of Spaniards who are on the brink of leading the sector possesses the expertise required.

In the present context of economic and social turmoil, is positive leadership possible, without losing sight of the international objectives and obligations in the field of environmental conservation?

It is possible if the qualities mentioned previously: global thinking, knowledge and the ability to share, are present. Spain and Europe have managed to put in place a social and structural modus operandi based on proper values that are still a reference for the world as a whole, despite the macro-economic and debt problems besetting them. We need positive leadership to exercise the kind of management that will attract the investments Europe needs and to hone our competitiveness.

The ability to retain the values on which Europe is based, to honour the talent and expertise of its

“Thinking positively, the best place for Spain and its leaders is Europe and being involved in the decisions taken in Europe at international level”

professionals and to attract new projects are key if leadership is once more to be perceived as positive and Spain is to be set firmly on the road to European benchmark development.

What part do Spanish entrepreneurs and institutional leaders play in this scenario?

There is only one way to look at this. If a leader is only concerned with a limited territory there can be no future. Although we must look after our country and focus our efforts on its advancement, a leader should view Spain in the global context that is the reality of the world today. A leader must be capable of seeing Spain from a global standpoint and, in my opinion, this is a basic condition for Spain's economy to gain a position of advantage. Thinking positively, the best place for Spain and its leaders is Europe and being involved in the decisions taken at international level in Europe. Without Europe a globalised economy is impossible, as the European Union is a key player at international level.

If we look around at business leadership and particularly at companies that are becoming references, it is immediately apparent that those companies are global. Most of their business is spread out all over the world. The positive factor is that their headquarters are in Spain, but their sphere of operations is global and this enriches our business fabric.

“Young people must have a dream and must push towards it. To do so they need to share their projects with others who are as enthusiastic and dynamic as they are in an environment such as the internet”

On the basis of your international experience and your involvement on multi-cultural boards, how do you think international dignitaries perceive Spanish executives? What is the view held abroad of our leaders?

The view held of Spain from abroad makes a distinction between the whole and the individual. Our profile is higher from an individual than from an overall standpoint. Companies and leaders considered individually are being appraised more highly than they are as a whole. It is up to all of us, as leaders, to make it understood that we are involved in a common project at both national and international level. The message we convey internationally must be clear so that the image held of Spain and its leaders as a reference in this common project stays as high as possible.

What are the key factors for successfully directing environmental, water resource or business projects and what are the ten commandments a leader should follow?

The key factors are: firstly, a clear vision of the project to be undertaken, secondly, sharing the project with other players who may be able to contribute different viewpoints, thirdly, each player (public authority, civil society, the media, business and institutional leaders) must play its part. If we can all get genuinely involved, the capacity to manage and plan is bound to reap success.

With this simple scheme in place we will be able to attract funds to finance our projects, to manage them and to position ourselves in the world. In the face of the pessimism that is beginning to shroud Spain, we must show that we are capable of harnessing these factors and getting them to work together so that the positive strength of our business and social fabric becomes evident and we can move forward.

Any positive advice for future leaders who are currently faced with a complex scenario for the development of their careers?

Today the world is theirs. Today, nobody, and far less a young leader, can nurse the idea that the place they were born in or the place where they studied is where they will be developing their entire professional career. For them, the world has become a global scenario full of possibilities. The message leaders should convey to the young is that they are the generation with the greatest capacities Spain has ever had, that the schools in which they were educated are among the most prestigious the world over, that they should have a dream and push towards it and to do so they need to share their projects with others who are as enthusiastic and dynamic as they are in an environment such as the internet.

We must encourage them to move on and to reach their goals, whatever country they are in and whatever difficulties they may be facing.

Contacto

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