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Leading in positive

Pilar Martínez-Cosentino

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“We are bombarded with extremely negative messages every day, but we need to view the world through a different lens; the lens of opportunity”



Pilar Martínez-Cosentino | Executive Deputy Chair of the Cosentino Group.

Pilar Martínez-Cosentino graduated in Law and Corporate Legal Advisory Services from Universidad Pontificia de Comillas (ICADE) in Madrid, and subsequently obtained a MBA from Instituto de Empresa. After completing her studies she worked at KPMG until 2003 when she formally joined the Cosentino Group, initially in the legal area and then in strategic planning management. Since 2015 she has been the executive deputy chair of the Cosentino Group and a member of the Board of Trustees of the Eduardo Justo Foundation, an entity dedicated to fostering the training and leadership of young people. She has recently been chosen as one of the top “100 Women Leaders in Spain” in the most recent edition of the Mujeres&Cia ranking and has received the CaixaBank Women in Business (“Mujer Empresaria CaixaBank”) Award.

In 2021 you received Spain’s CaixaBank Women in Business Award, which recognises the talent and professional excellence of female entrepreneurs in Spain and fosters the worldwide networks of female business leaders. How would you define your leadership model? In your experience, what qualities should a good leader have?

My leadership model is a humanistic model, which places people at the centre; a model characterised by high levels of empathy, the ability to listen and, above all, focuses on leading by example. I view leadership as a process that forms part of our day to day activities, in which our actions demonstrate what we expect of our teams.

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The numerous duties associated with your position include coordinating and managing various teams in areas such as human resources, digital transformation and the development of the distribution model. We are living through strange times, in which we have had to adapt to working remotely and have little or no contact with others. In these circumstances, how can leaders continue to motivate and inspire their teams?

In times like these, and in view of everything we have experienced, working closely with our colleagues, the ability to listen, developing empathy and really appreciating how others feel is of particular importance; knowing that you are there for them will help us all to move forward. My job is to transform the organisation, and this task is performed by people, not machines. For this reason it is crucial that those required to perform the transformation know you are there for them; that they have your support.

Digitalisation has had a key role in enabling Spanish companies to diversify their markets and become more competitive. What role has technology played in the Cosentino Group's expansion and internationalisation?

Technology has played a fundamental role in Cosentino Group's past and present, and will be of increasing importance in its future. Primarily, because it has enabled us to grow in orderly manner during our internationalisation process. At present, 92% of our sales take place outside the Spanish market in more than 140 business units. Secondly, it has helped us to grow more efficiently. Digitalisation has facilitated the robotisation and automation of simple processes and enable us to focus efforts on those aspects that contribute most value.

It has also had an important role in all aspects of communication. In this regard, we have seen the importance of developing a good internal communication network, in order to be able to work closely with your teams despite being physically apart; and, from an external viewpoint, the importance of developing networks with customers and opinion leaders. We consider that this is a fundamental aspect of communication, as it enables us to work hand in hand with customers and to innovate more quickly. For this reason, developing this ecosystem has been our priority in recent years; we firmly believe that it is going to be the key to Cosentino's future.

Nowadays, innovation is a key driver in order to ensure sustainable growth. How can leaders stimulate innovation in the teams?

I think innovation is a way of doing things. The strategy we adopt to foster innovation is to work transversally involving various areas; the interchange of different viewpoints stimulates the generation of ideas and fosters progress.

It also encourages the development of a culture of non-conformity, in which change is not feared and people constantly ask themselves, "How can this be done better? How can we learn?". First and foremost, I like to say that Cosentino is an organisation that never ceases to learn, but that learning has to be fostered. Not being frightened of failing or making a mistake is also important. You have to empower teams, listen to them in a cross-cutting way, give them the confidence to put their ideas into practice and learn from the process.

Lastly, it is important to adopt a systems approach to innovation. As leaders we need to organise the processes involved in innovation to ensure that progress is made, lessons are learned and further progress is assured.

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Talent is another essential element of a successful business. Although we have highly qualified young people, with languages and broad global vision and experience, we continue to have alarming levels of youth unemployment. The Eduardo Justo Foundation is focused precisely on boosting talent and leadership of young people. What steps do we need to take in the training environment to contribute to the development of the leaders of tomorrow?

We need to reduce the gap between the world of education and business. Dual vocational training is key to the creation of high quality employment and to respond to the needs of today's companies. Although we are seeing very high levels of unemployment, organisations are unable to fill a large number of their job positions because the talent required to fill those profiles is not available.

I also support the idea of a dual-mode university model which enables students to combine academic studies with the practical training companies require. As a nation, I think we need to put our complexes aside and opt for a model of this nature.

Another aspect that should be addressed is the strict dichotomy that exists between science and humanities. We need more well-rounded profiles which combine both disciplines and complement each other. I am convinced that it would provide young people with new skills and bring greater progress.

In terms of leadership, who have been your mentors? Which leaders or important people have inspired you?

It is difficult to choose, but I think my parents have had a very important role in inspiring my leadership style; each in their own way. My father, with his far-sighted, highly pragmatic approach and his ability to make things happen; working shoulder to shoulder with his team, transforming and dreaming big. My mother, with her empathy, who taught me to see things from the point of view of others, to develop the ability to listen and to have the courage to want to better myself every day. Working on your own professional development and identifying what your opportunities for personal improvement and development are is of great benefit in all spheres of life, and I think that it is important not to be afraid to do this.

All studies indicate that corporate governance in Board of Directors formed from individuals with diverse professional profiles is more efficient. However, the number of women in significant roles remains inadequate. You have recently been chosen as one of the top “100 Women Leaders in Spain”. In your experience, how can women's leadership be fostered?

I believe in meritocracy and little is said of its importance in professional development. I am convinced that, if organisations were to give more importance to meritocracy, there would be more women in positions of responsibility. We need to break that glass ceiling or create the context required to ensure that a merit-based culture is created within companies. The business sector continues to be dominated by a masculine leadership style and we have to favour more neutral forms of leadership that better match women's specific characteristics.

Sustainability is another of the great challenges we face as a society. Consumers are now much more product aware and want to identify with the products they buy, and what's behind them. Companies also have a commitment to the environment and the societies where they carry on their business activities. How can leaders develop a corporate culture focused on sustainability?

Sustainability is related to long-term vision and management. You have to be forward-looking and go beyond next month's results. The challenge is to implement a worthwhile project.

A broad outlook also needs to be adopted when addressing sustainability. On the one hand, there is the environmental aspect, which should be provide the framework for the business activity as a whole. In this connection, industrial companies like ours have a long journey ahead of us; although it poses a challenge, it also offers an opportunity.

On the other, there is the social aspect, how we involve stakeholders in the organisation, not only the professionals, but also the society in which the business project is developed. In short, we create an impact wherever we go and we need to participate in the commitment to create a better society. It is not just the responsibility of governments, it also a question of responsible companies making a commitment.

Lastly, there are all those aspects in relation with governance and transparency. It is important to adopt transparent, measurable governance which helps to transmit the organisation's essence to the consumer. Consumers want to identify with the brand, they want to know what type of product or service they are buying and whether its values align with their own.

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Lastly, the Cosentino Group has provided employment for more than 5,300 people throughout the pandemic. In a situation, in which young people are once again the greatest victims, what positive farewell message would you give to future generations?

I would like them to see a future full of opportunities, a future and a present. We are bombarded with extremely negative messages every day, but I believe we should view the world through a different lens; the lens of opportunity. We are living a moment in world history with highly positive developments and we need to embrace them. I think attitude is key; attitude heightens talent and the world is thirsty for young people who want to build a better world. We await you with open arms.

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