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ESPAÑOLA DE  
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## Leading in positive

Irene Cano

April 2022

# “Leadership means recognising talent and leading it almost remotely”



**Irene Cano** | General manager of Meta for Spain and Portugal.

Irene Cano, a graduate in Business Administration and Management from Universidad de Oviedo, was appointed as the general manager of Meta Iberia in June 2021. Irene joined Meta in 2010 as the sales and business development manager, having gained more than 10 years' experience in the industry working at the most important technology companies. Prior to managing the team at Meta España, Irene worked at Google, Yahoo!, Orange Spain and Volvo CE in the UK. She is also a member of the Board of Directors of Adveo and forms part of the Advisory Board of Liberbank in Asturias. Irene has been recognised by several publications as one of the 25 most influential women in Spain, awarded the Businesswomen Leadership Award by the Spanish Federation of Women Directors, Executives, Professionals and Companies (FEDEPE) and actively cooperates with various not-for-profit organisations, including most notably the Vincent Ferrer Foundation.

**Throughout your professional career, you have been recognised as a leading figure in the area of leadership and innovation, and as one of Spain's most influential women. How would you define your leadership model? In your experience, which qualities do you need to develop in order to lead teams appropriately?**

Leadership is closely linked to the ability to turn ideas into reality and, above all, to empower individuals to work together to achieve a common goal. In my opinion, what a good leader has to do is identify those

individuals they want to work with in the interest of achieving the goals defined, hire the best talent, and then to be skilled enough to know when to stand aside to enable them to flourish. It makes absolutely no sense to hire great people and then try to impose a criterion on them which is perhaps not theirs. In other words, in my opinion leadership means recognising talent and leading it almost remotely.

**In the context of the pandemic, all companies have experienced a change in scenario, in which remote working has taken precedence over in-office presence. Technology has taken a leading role in employment relationships and communication with customers. How can leaders continue to motivate and inspire their teams and stakeholders in the face of this paradigm shift?**

Workplace culture has to evolve towards a hybrid model which prioritises talent and performance over in-office presence. When this occurs and companies have the mechanisms in place to enable fair and unbiased assessment of performance, irrespective of the place of work, it is much easier for leaders to motivate people. Ultimately, motivation has a lot to do with an employee's relationship with the company and the leader. Employees do not normally leave the company, they leave their manager, so endowing managers with the tools they need to manage and keep employees motivated is of prime importance. Plus, it is important that the leader has a talent for motivating others and has a need to do so. Therefore, a manager's performance is also closely linked to their ability to motivate employees.

I believe that technology and, increasingly, immersive experiences are going to generate a real hybrid sense of presence that will make it difficult to distinguish who is at home and who is in the office, because we are all going to be using the same technology.

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**Not only has Meta accompanied its millions of users throughout the months of restricted mobility, it has also contributed to the economic recovery and the survival of thousands of Spanish companies. How are you supporting the digitalisation of those companies that were previously non-digital?**

Digitalisation enables companies to optimise processes, reduce costs and develop, by actively listening to your customers, products that cover not only customers' current needs, but also anticipate their future needs. This is a differentiating factor for any company that wants to be competitive. In essence, digital environments are helping companies to survive, stay afloat and expand.

**Digitalisation is also associated with the technical profiles. Despite the increase in numbers, there are still few women in the science and technology fields. How can STEM-related courses be encouraged among young women and girls? What would be the most effective initiatives from the perspective of both companies and public authorities?**

I think there is a need to minimise the gaps by making a commitment to diversity and above all to inclusion, which marks the next step after diversity and what turns the various ideas and aims into a reality. However, in the case of our girls, the problem arises in early childhood and in the home. Girls need to be educated to succeed rather than to be liked. Girls tend to try to make a good impression whereas boys tend to be competitive, and being competitive and being liked rarely go hand in hand. Those who aim to make a good impression look for activities they know they are going to do well. They generally shy away activities that imply a challenge and for which there is no guarantee of success. As parents and then as educators, we need to cultivate that interest in girls, that curiosity and self confidence in the early stages of their development to ensure that they can compete on an equal footing with their male peers, and opt for STEM-related fields which ensure their future employability.

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**Talent development is another of the great challenges facing us as a society. With regard to education, where should we be heading?**

In my opinion, our children should be taught a series of basic disciplines that will help them to develop both personally and professionally. Many other subjects should no longer be included since, thanks to technology, they are freely available to everyone. For example, it makes no sense for our children to memorise information organised on the servers of certain companies in recent years. It is much better to store this information on the hard drive, in the cloud, of any important company. What we need to do is teach our children how to find and access this stored data. Children have to leave school being able to program, speak English, which are universal languages, to reason. Mathematics is fundamental to reasoning. In Spain we may need to reconsider how we teach subject matter, without removing it from the teaching model. In contrast, philosophy should be a core subject. A subject which fosters critical thinking skills, the ability to think for oneself and which encourages diversity of thought should form part of our children's education from the outset.

**At the age of 19, Mark Zuckerberg designed an application that went viral at his university and by the age of 23 his company was at the forefront of the digital revolution. From your perspective, how do you view the world of entrepreneurship in Spain? How can leaders boost innovation and enterprise?**

I believe there are many innovative ideas in Spain and an extensive capacity for implementation. Financing for innovation is also more freely available and, above all, there are many role models. Spain is already home to several important unicorns which is an incentive to all those who are currently trying to start a business. I also think that technology and the developments we are experiencing represent a great opportunity. We are going to develop a metaverso environment, offering endless economic opportunities for the development of products, services, virtual realities and their content, as well as devices. In other words, Spain offers a wide range of possibilities for those seeking to start an enduring business in this area.

**Lastly, what positive farewell message would you give to future generations?**

I would tell them not to be afraid; fear has never been an ally of progress, but rather to invest in the future and be patient; which is something that younger generations tend to overlook because, although technology makes learning processes much shorter, they do still exist. The various stages of the learning process have to be passed through and although initially you may not see the point of each stage or why you need to pass through them, a day will come in your career when all the different pieces of information fall into place and you understand how your various life experiences enable you to progress further.

## Contact

**CONFEDERACIÓN ESPAÑOLA DE DIRECTIVOS Y EJECUTIVOS - CEDE**

World Trade Center  
Moll de Barcelona, s/n Edificio Sur 3ª planta  
08039 Barcelona (Spain)  
Tel. +34 93 508 83 20  
Fax. +34 93 508 83 21  
E-mail: info@directivoscede.com