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Ángel Simón

"The characteristic we most admire in a leader is a commitment to everybody"

Ángel Simón | Senior Vice President Iberia & Latam at Veolia and President of Agbar

Born in Manresa, Ángel studied Civil Engineering at Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña, and subsequently took an MBA in Company Management at Escuela Superior de Administración y Dirección de Empresas (ESADE).

He has practised his profession at various companies; he was a manager at Área Metropolitana de Barcelona, and in 1995 he joined Agbar, a benchmark group in the integral water cycle with more than one and a half centuries of history, where he works to this day.

In 1999 he moved to Chile to become the general manager of Aguas Andinas, a group company and one of the leading water management companies in Latin America, a pioneer in finding solutions to the main water challenges.

In 2002 he was appointed general manager of Aigües de Barcelona, and in 2010 he assumed the presidency of Agbar.

The Agbar Group has more than 150 years of history and 16,239 employees, and brings together more than 128 companies operating in the integral water cycle. How would you define your leadership model? In your experience, what qualities should a good leader have?

Agbar's leadership is characterised by being a business model that is based on innovation, talent, knowledge and, especially, people. Our professionals are committed to Agbar's purpose, which is none other than to improve people's future by sustainably managing a resource such as water. When you have committed professionals with knowledge and talent to whom you are also giving ongoing training, when you innovate, you discover the secret to lasting 155 years and keeping going for 155 more.

Agbar serves more than 26 million customers around the world, what are your main values?

Our main value is that of not leaving anybody behind. Water is a basic good, and was recognised as a human right in 2010. Therefore, this company's purpose is the same purpose that is represented by this fundamental right, and young talent connects with that value. The most important way of retaining talent, of making people stay with you, is to make them feel that the work they do every day is valued. I think that the most important thing in a company is that knowledge, enthusiasm and commitment are aligned with your values.

In this respect, who were your role models? What are the characteristics you most admire in a leader?

The characteristic we most admire in a leader is their commitment to everybody. In a company, the most important thing is to be answerable to the stakeholders, so you have to strive to fulfil that obligation with all your relationship groups and all your stakeholders. Obviously, we all have people we look up to, and these people are specific to the different periods of our lives. I studied civil engineering because Agustín de Betancourt, the founder of the school, was my hero. His values were very clear: the use of reason, technical capability, science, nature and social matters. In 1802 the Escuela de Caminos was very technical in the field of knowledge, but also had that social and environmental framework. Then there were Juan Benet, Ildefonso Cerdá.

In the business world, I have had three important mentors. Pasqual Maragall, when I was director general of the metropolitan area; Ricardo Fornesa, as president of Agbar; and if I had to choose someone I admire and look up to now, I would say Isidre Fainé. We learn from values in general and from individuals in particular.

Geopolitical confrontations, the rise in energy prices and inflation have generated a backdrop of considerable uncertainty for companies and for the economy in general. What are the main challenges companies are going to have to face in 2023?

The current context of uncertainty obliges us to do two things. First, to develop considerable flexibility. We have to be able to take decisions quickly in response to changes in the environment. That flexibility also means that we have to be capable of anticipating events. If we can predict what is going to happen, we will also be capable of reacting to the new problems that arise every day. We have to be highly aware of the fact that we are living in times of uncertainty, of transition and of a change of model, and that when there is a change of paradigm this gives rise to threats, but also to opportunities. That is what we have to look at, which opportunities are on the table right now.

What do you think are the characteristics defining this new model?

This transition will be defined, firstly, by technology. It is obvious that digitalisation and the new technologies are going to become available, not only in the business world and the professional world, but also in the personal world, in everybody's life. Secondly, by sustainability. For this world to be sustainable, there must be a change of model. And lastly, by how people

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are going to adapt and live in an environment in which everyone chooses what makes them happy, even though that sounds difficult. Although until now people chose the only routes there were, now that is not the case. There will be the opportunity for everyone to choose the route they think is the best and that satisfies them most in life.

Of course, this digitalisation process represents a major advance, but also a challenge in terms of the need to address the digital divide affecting the more vulnerable sectors of society. What initiatives are the water resource companies implementing in order to combat the digital divide and social exclusion?

One of the problems caused by the transition from one model to another are the gaps: the gender gap, the social gap, the generation gap and the digital divide. Most of the time they all go together, so I like to address them as a whole.

At Agbar we put in place a programme aligned with the United Nations goals, which consider water to be a universal right, and, accordingly, nobody can be denied access to it. Everybody needs to have access to minimum consumption. From there, we have developed programmes to enable those who cannot pay for water to find ways to do so. The one I like most is OLS, which means Occupation, Leadership and Support, because for somebody to be able to pay for their water they need to find work, and in order to get a job you have to exercise leadership.

The word "leadership" is repeated at all levels of society, in each of the areas we want. Also, "support", you must support people and you must share. This is the programme that we are developing to enable people to find quality jobs and have a dignified life in which they can address everything that is in front of them. This must be done by supporting people and sharing with them. We collaborate with the Red Cross on this programme and we are highly satisfied with the success obtained.

As regards the gender gap, there is an ever increasing number of women on boards of directors and in executive positions. How do you assess these last few years? How do you think women's access to executive posts will evolve?
We have all made a considerable effort together and we must continue to do so, but, above all, we must continue from the most basic level of education.

At Agbar, we work with people with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) degrees; what we need to do is ensure, in a clear, purposeful way, that women move into this sector. Still only 30% of our graduates are women. Therefore, we need to give girls people to look up to in STEM subjects to encourage them to study that type of course and then they will be able to work in this area. We must act in the educational sphere in a clear and purposeful way. We have improved a lot, but we still have a long way to go.

Also, companies, on many occasions, are more advanced than society itself; so society has to support us. We can be the large companies driving that gender equality, but society must also support us.

As well as the gender breach, in general there is a lack of talent in STEM courses, at least in Spain. Only 10% of young people study some kind of engineering. How do you attract and retain talent at Agbar?
Talent retention is achieved, as I have said in this interview, by aligning the values, essentially, of young people, who are looking for a specific type of commitment or company, and thus, aligning the values of the company with those of society, which are basically the planet, the environment and people. If we are capable of aligning those values, that is how we will be able to retain talent.

Is there a training programme at your company for professionals to develop these skills?
It is clear to us that the training chain needs to be complete, so we have a complete training cycle at each level of the company. We work on vocational training, the complement to the master's degrees and doctorates that graduates study for, and we add innovation to it. What we are looking for is 360-degree training precisely to hold on to that talent, to ensure that that talent is committed, and to ensure that we are ahead of society and acting as drivers.

As regards Next Gen funds, we have a good opportunity as a country to develop new projects. What is your opinion of these grants and the level of public- and private-sector cooperation?
I would have liked water to have been one of the fundamental pillars of the Next Gen funds. There is a Strategic Project for Economic Recovery and Transformation (PERTE) for water that is based on digitalisation, and we have got another for agriculture, but I would have liked, as part of these PERTEs, to have had the opportunity to make water, which is one of the main problems we have in this country these days, a central value. I think we must take advantage of the fact that we have got a PERTE, as well as many other opportunities.

The Agbar Group has presented proposals with a value of more than EUR 8,000 million throughout Spain. My opinion is that, with public- and private-sector participation, with agreements between municipal councils and autonomous community governments, although we do not have that central axis, we are going to be able to penetrate a lot of subjects that, basically, are going to be based on infrastructure and on nature, which include water and the circular economy. We are going to try to make these Next Generation fund sustainability goals have an impact on society.

Finally, young people are once again the hardest hit by this new crisis marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the last trace of the pandemic and the acceleration of the digital revolution that has positive effects and also negative ones, such as disinformation. What positive message would you send out to the new generations?

The message to young people is always the same: the world changes and evolves on the basis of the commitment you make to that change and evolution. Young people have that opportunity, they have to do something they like doing, how they like doing it; they have to have a personal life project, the personal project cannot be separated from the professional one. From that starting point, they will be able to change the world as they wish.

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