



Leaders Making a Difference

INTERVIEW SERIES REPORT | 2024 EDITION

dss⁺

Protect. Transform. Sustain.

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Celebrating female leaders to inspire others

Now in its fourth year, **dss+ Leaders Making a Difference** is a celebration of the achievements of female leaders. This initiative is a testament to the passion and dedication of women from diverse backgrounds and cultures, all at the pinnacle of their professions. By sharing their career journeys, we gain valuable insights into how they became leaders in safety, sustainability and operations, and how their leadership has evolved. We also discover the innovative ideas and programmes they are implementing to foster organisational growth and individual wellbeing.

Through their personal narratives, these exceptional women serve as role models and mentors for those seeking to enhance their careers and make a positive impact in their chosen fields. We dig deep into the practical business techniques and skills they employ, such as leveraging technology and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. These real-world insights provide a wealth of actionable concepts and strategies that we can all learn from and use in our professional lives.

We hope this initiative gives a fresh perspective and acts as a source of inspiration and encouragement to those women looking to improve the lives of colleagues and communities through best business practices. We believe that by sharing these stories and strategies, we can collectively transform businesses from good to great, fostering a more inclusive and successful professional landscape.

It's only by connecting and listening to each other's challenges and successes, no matter how small that we will transform businesses from good to great.



The panellists

In compiling this report, we conducted in-depth interviews between December 2023 and March 2024.

We gained valuable insights and thoughts from our expert panellists, all working in senior leadership roles across a range of industries and regions.

We have great pleasure in introducing each of them below.

dss+ / Unilabs Healthcare Switzerland



Betül Susamis Unaran

dss+ Impact Advisory Board; Chief Commercial Officer at Unilabs

This year's EMEA Ambassador for the dss+ Leaders Making a Difference initiative, Betül Susamis Unaran, member of the dss+ Impact Advisory Board and Chief Commercial Officer at Unilabs, discusses her drive to transform healthcare, diagnostics and ultimately make a difference in people's lives.



[Read Betül's full interview](#)

Luxembourg National Railway Company (CFL) Rail Transportation Luxembourg



Doris Horvath

Head of the Safety, Security and Environment

With a wealth of safety management experience, Doris Horvath is passionate about managers investing time in face-to-face safety management to create an open and engaging safety culture.



[Read Doris's full interview](#)

Romande Energie Power & Utilities Switzerland



Aurore Amaudruz

Director of Markets

Passionate about renewable energies and their impact, here Aurore explains the importance of walking the talk, surrounding yourself with the best people, understanding market triggers and being inspired every day.



[Read Aurore's full interview](#)

RATP Group Rail Transportation France



Nathalie Ponzevera

Director of Health and Safety

With passion for defining strategic issues and implementing solutions, Nathalie Ponzevera uses her extensive management experience to drive safety and performance by creating a culture that is open, honest, and celebrated.



[Read Nathalie's full interview](#)

dss+ / DuPont Chemicals United States



Dr. Alexa Dembek

dss+ Impact Advisory Board; Chief Technology and Sustainability Officer at DuPont

A born problem solver, the company's current Chief Technology and Sustainability Officer, Dr. Alexa Dembek talks to dss+ about how innovation and sustainability are intertwined to deliver business value, how she stays motivated as a leader, and important lessons she's learned along her journey.



[Read Alexa's full interview](#)

Emirates Steel Arkan Metals & Mining UAE



Anna Petrachkova

Former Health and Safety Director

With over 20 years' senior experience of safety management within multi-national oil, gas and mining companies, Anna Petrachkova champions persistent, visible, and sincere leadership as the secret ingredient of a safety culture.



[Read Anna's full interview](#)

Bayer Crop Science, Asia Pacific Agriculture Singapore



Cherie Tan

Head, Public Affairs, Science and Sustainability

Formative years in the field have shaped Cherie Tan's career and her approach to sustainability. Now Head, Public Affairs, Science and Sustainability at Bayer, Cherie spoke with dss+ about the lessons that stayed with her and how she applies these in her daily work, as well as the reasons why she encourages other leaders to head out into the field.



[Read Cherie's full interview](#)

Messer Chemicals Germany



Virginia Esly

CEO Europe and Member of the Executive Management Board

With extensive and diverse operational business experience, including overseeing merger integration and business transformation, Virginia Esly shares her leadership style, passion for innovation and the importance of being customer focused to gain a competitive edge.



[Read Virginia's full interview](#)

Xylem Europe Power & Utilities Switzerland



Anne-Sophie Heitz

Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) Leader

In her latest role as Environment, Health and Safety (EHS) Leader for global water technology provider Xylem Europe, Anne-Sophie Heitz builds on a vibrant passion for safety that began when working in the power generation industry. Anne-Sophie talks to dss+ about how a curious mind, a thirst for knowledge and getting to know her audience have been crucial qualities for conquering safety leadership challenges.



[Read Anne-Sophie's full interview](#)

Woodside Power & Utilities Australia



Yvette Manolas

General Manager and Head of Global Decarbonisation

Combining engineering experience, operational know-how, business acumen and a positive leadership style has enabled Yvette Manolas to drive real change right across Woodside's global business. She met with dss+ to discuss her role, the way businesses and leaders can approach decarbonisation and sustainability more broadly, and what's worked for her.



[Read Yvette's full interview](#)

Inflexion Private Equity & Principal Investors United Kingdom



Isabelle Pagnotta

Partner and Head of Business Services

With over 20 years of private equity experience, Isabelle Pagnotta has a proven track record of backing and partnering with management teams to help them accelerate growth and achieve their ambitions. Here Isabelle discusses why she's an advocate of diversity in the financial world, as well as her passion for mentoring aspiring female private equity professionals.



[Read Isabelle's full interview](#)

BHP Mining & Metals Japan



Yuki Ghantous

Japan Country President

Unafraid to dive into the unknown and test the limits of what's possible, BHP's Yuki Ghantous has embraced a journey across cultures, sectors and roles. Yuki shared her principles for leadership and decision making, as well as her thoughts on the business value of listening, with dss+.



[Read Yuki's full interview](#)

Arcmont Asset Management Private Equity & Principal Investors United Kingdom



Talia Elsener

Head of Corporate Sustainability and Responsible Investing

The ability to absorb, learn and summarise detailed reports has become a key skill for Talia Elsener, as she navigates and leads Arcmont Asset Management's ESG efforts. Here she explains her career progression and the impact of linking financial incentives with positive change.



[Read Talia's full interview](#)

Ivanhoe Mines Metals & Mining South Africa



Marna Cloete

President

Marna Cloete's trajectory into the mining industry emerged out of necessity and opportunism. Now, as an influential leader in the sector, Marna explains the significance of shaping her career path and the power of a 'can do' mindset.



[Read Marna's full interview](#)



Judy Zheng

QSE Director, Swire Coca-Cola China; Chair of the Swire China Health & Safety Working Group

Drawing on a background in food engineering and extensive experience in diverse operational roles across the supply chain, Judy Zheng, QSE Director, Swire Coca-Cola China, shares insights on the roles and values of corporate safety culture and leadership development.



[Read Judy's full interview](#)



Saakshi Agrawal

Director – Strategy

Saakshi, a strategic fintech leader, merges financial expertise with innovation, championing diversity and driving sustainable practices. Her journey embodies resilience while fostering continuous learning, defined by clarity, integrity, and empowering leadership.



[Read Saakshi's full interview](#)



Nathalie Viens

Managing Director and Head of Asset Management Private Infrastructure

Approaching her career through a pragmatic lens, Nathalie Viens, Managing Director and Head of Asset Management at CBRE, talks to dss+ about how to remain passionate and focused while guiding yourself and others into the future.



[Read Nathalie's full interview](#)



Cristina Santos

Business Director

With a career spanning more than 30 years, Cristina is currently Business Director of Univar Solutions, a global chemicals and ingredients distribution company. Closely linked to the industrial chemicals sector, Cristina's career has been marked by the continuous pursuit of perfection in the essentials, respecting people and their individualities.



[Read Cristina's full interview](#)



Luciana Côrtes Carvas

Human Resources, Occupational Health & Safety and Social Responsibility Director

With an extensive background in human resources, Luciana Côrtes Carvas drives workplace safety at São Martinho with great authenticity, ensuring her career journey is an opportunity to influence, care for and lead people in a respectful and enjoyable way. With 12,600 people working for this organisation, amongst the largest sugar-energy groups in Brazil, the responsibility is large.



[Read Luciana's full interview](#)



Cristiane Goulart

Labour Relations, Health and Safety Leader

By combining legal expertise and extensive experience in health and safety, Cristiane Goulart has created an inspiring career built on passion and responsibility for safety and the well-being of employees.



[Read Cristiane's full interview](#)



Ting He

Deputy General Manager

Self-proclaimed as a "non-mainstream" female leader in the construction industry, Ms. He Ting, Deputy General Manager, China Construction Science and Industry Corporation, has developed a profound understanding of sustainability over her 20+ years career and become a committed practitioner of sustainability in the industry.



[Read Ting's full interview](#)



dss+ would like to express our sincere gratitude to all esteemed interviewees for their participation in our interview series.

Your insights, expertise, and perspective added tremendous value to this report and to those looking for guidance and senior leadership views.

Top 5 themes extracted from over **1,000 minutes** of discussions with **21 senior female leaders** conducted from December 2023 to March 2024: →



Top 5 themes

#1 / Transforming safety habits

The visibility of leaders talking about safety and showing they care is crucial. To transform safety culture, we all need to find the magic key that unlocks the door to safety as a force for good. Leveraging the latest technology can help us make advancements in traditional safety management.

#2 / Breaking down barriers

Never underestimate people's willingness to grasp the broader picture and acknowledge the significance of their contributions within the larger context. The right company culture helps underpin a resilient team spirit, particularly when hardships and challenges appear. Good leaders learn continuously, exchange ideas with people, focus on value and are open to new ideas.

#3 / Fostering responsible business practices

Diversity and equal opportunities for all employees cultivate a more inclusive workplace culture. This not only enhances employee satisfaction and productivity but also strengthens our resilience as an organisation. In the search for more responsible business solutions, companies are increasingly looking to gain a competitive edge, particularly through the use of technology and innovation.

#4 / Strengthening sustainability initiatives

Sustainability initiatives must be credible in the eyes of all stakeholders, and accountability must be a high priority. It is essential to have the flexibility to pivot as your value chain and macroeconomic environment evolve. It's okay to approach sustainability from different perspectives. We must remain respectful that companies and industries can be on different journeys.

#5 / Managing impacts

Face challenges head-on and adjust strategies accordingly. It's also important to listen – a lot of co-creation can be achieved by really listening to all stakeholders so that impacts are identified and understood across the business. Companies need to improve their understanding of the positive effects of safety on performance.



Transforming safety habits

Be visible

Safety needs to be kept on the radar for everybody by showing a visible commitment on a daily basis. The visibility of leaders talking about safety and showing they care is a crucial ingredient of any safety management programme. This includes leading by example with field visits and face-to-face safety discussions, constantly reinforcing that "actions speak louder than words". Safety is less about cutting and pasting rules and regulations and more about adapting messages and practices that fit the environment. This can only be achieved by stepping into the boots of others so that safety functions are regularly refreshed to match new tools, materials and working practices. A healthy and safe workforce is paramount.

Change hearts and minds

Moving the safety dial to where it should be can only be effective by changing hearts and minds. If people understand why something is necessary, they will be more receptive. One of the most challenging exercises is implementing a long-term cultural change that considers safety as a positive rather than a negative. It's about taking the fear out of reporting safety issues and understanding that it's an opportunity for leadership to learn from mistakes. Good leadership is vital to changing mindsets and behaviours, but it requires the support and willingness of senior management to prioritise safety. In terms of transforming safety culture, we all need to find the magic key that unlocks the door to safety as a force for good across the whole organisation.

Leverage technology

There is vast potential to enhance safety through digitalisation. Increasingly, technology can be used to complete repetitive tasks that help to keep safety at the front and centre of working practices, prompting people to remain switched on and alert to risks. When launching a safety campaign or programme, robust data analysis is an effective tool for highlighting areas where improvements can be made. Leveraging the latest technology can also help us make advancements in traditional safety management. Using gamification and digital comic books for safety campaigns are good examples of how technology can be used to innovate and improve audience reach and engagement.

Work Injury Costs in the US:

\$167 bn.

Components:

Wage and productivity losses:

\$47.4 bn.

Medical expenses:

\$36.6 bn.

Administrative expenses:

\$57.5 bn.

Employers' uninsured costs:

\$13.8 bn.

Damage to motor vehicles:

\$5.4 bn.

Fire losses:

\$6.3 bn.

(Source: [National Safety Council](#), 2021)



Breaking down barriers

Engage people

Companies must actively engage people and show them how to contribute to a more sustainable future. Empowerment is not about people doing what they want. It's about giving them the flexibility and room to grow, while simultaneously setting clear targets and expectations. How you treat, respect, look after, and develop people is key. Collaboration and creating a family-like environment are equally important. It's essential to remain approachable, stay in touch with the workforce and create an openness that allows people to talk to you. Never underestimate people's willingness to grasp the broader picture and acknowledge the significance of their contributions within the larger context.

Accident rates are significantly lower where employees genuinely feel they are empowered around safety matters

14%

Compared to those where they do not

26%

(Source: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/>, 2023).

Focus on culture

You can have the best processes in the world, but it's company culture that makes the difference. A poor company culture reduces buy-in from people who will lack belief in what you are trying to achieve. The right company culture helps underpin a resilient team spirit, particularly when hardships and challenges appear. However, changing behaviours is continuous work with no finish line. It requires a deliberate, planned and daily effort. Whether it's safety, sustainability or operational challenges, people often put up barriers and revert to specific habits and perceptions. It's about breaking down those barriers through education and creating a trusting environment that supports people in working towards a shared goal.

Awareness of at-work risks is higher where there is employee involvement

62%

compared to where there is no involvement

28%

(Source: <https://www.hse.gov.uk/>, 2023).

Improve leadership skills

Good leaders are both decisive and empowering. As a leader, you need to know when to make a decision and when to take a step back. Putting the right people in the right seat and empowering them to be the best they can be is key, as is having diverse opinions and experience around you. Improving communication skills is essential for explaining your vision, delivering a strategy and guiding people so they feel empowered to deliver. It is also important for a leader to understand how a company thinks and breathes and how information gets disseminated. Good leaders learn continuously, exchange ideas with people, focus on value and are open to new ideas.



Fostering responsible business practices

Create a resilient business

Companies can cultivate a more inclusive workplace culture by championing diversity and providing equal opportunities for all employees. This not only enhances employee satisfaction and productivity, but also strengthens a company's resilience. Effective risk management is an additional lever to enhance resilience as it reduces the likelihood of significant disruptions, protects business reputation, and improves decision-making by anticipating potential threats. When we talk about optimising processes, improving efficiency, and maximising productivity within a company, effective risk management is essential to identify, assess, and mitigate potential threats to the company's operations. The use of technology is a further key driver for companies to remain resilient and sustainable. Operational excellence helps to create a safer and more resilient work environment where employees are well-trained and valued.

Develop a competitive edge

In the search for more responsible business solutions, companies are increasingly looking to gain a competitive edge, particularly through the use of technology and innovation. Products are comparable, but gaining a competitive advantage comes from being customer-centric. Environmental, social and governance (ESG) excellence provides solid foundations for gaining a competitive edge, as does an effective safety management programme. Companies should look to evolve products and services with an increased ESG focus and highlight good safety management as a key differentiator against competitors.

64%

of organisations stated that third-party risk management was viewed as an organisational strategic imperative by their boards of directors and executive teams.

(Source: [ProcessUnity and CyberGRX](#), 2023)

41%

of organisations reported that they experienced three or more critical risk events in the last 12 months.

(Source: [Forrester](#), 2022)

Manage industry volatility

The key to creating a business that withstands industry volatility lies in a more holistic approach that encompasses technological innovation, environmental stewardship, social responsibility, and inclusive practices. By aligning business strategies with these principles, companies position themselves to navigate challenges effectively and thrive in a volatile market. If you know and understand the drivers of volatility and develop systems and processes accordingly to mitigate those risks, companies will be better prepared to manage uncertainty and adapt to changing conditions.



Strengthening sustainability issues

Be authentic and accountable

Sustainability has become a mission-critical issue over the last few years. Companies must adapt and comply or risk losing their licence to operate. Sustainability is not just about hitting targets on carbon emissions or social responsibility goals; it's about doing more than ticking compliance boxes. Sustainability now expands beyond business; it's also about people and their concerns for the world in which their children and grandchildren will live. Companies must be authentic about sustainability and actively engage stakeholders to show them how initiatives contribute to a more sustainable future. Initiatives must be credible in the eyes of all stakeholders, with a high priority placed on accountability.

50%
were providing employee training on climate change/climate action throughout 2023

49%
of organisations developed new climate-friendly products or services in 2023.

44%
had begun requiring business partners across their supply chain to meet specific sustainability criteria

(Source: <https://www.travelperk.com/>, 2023)

Value chain complexities

Businesses should aim to look across the whole value chain - where raw materials come from, where products are made and how they are transported. A company's approach to sustainability is becoming increasingly important and seen as a central value for employees and customers alike. Using data to collect information on the provenance of goods and to measure the carbon footprint of assets derived from within the value chain can help alleviate concerns and strengthen values. Flexibility is a further factor. The ability to pivot your strategy as your value chain and macroeconomic environment evolve is essential.

It's a journey

Each person's understanding of sustainability will be impacted by their social background, cultural heritage and experience, and we need to respect that. Ultimately, we all know that sustainability is about caring for the environment and being good stewards of the planet and everything it encompasses. However, it's important not to solely box up sustainability into a matrix to measure or quantify without recognising that it's okay to be on the journey and to approach sustainability from different perspectives. We also need to remain respectful of the fact that other companies and industries are on very different journeys.

59%
of companies started using more sustainable materials in 2023

59%
increased their energy efficiency in 2023

55%
of companies started using energy-efficient or climate-friendly machinery, technologies, and equipment in 2023

(Source: <https://www.travelperk.com/>, 2023)



Managing impacts

Face the challenges

A shortage of labour and expertise in the sustainability sector is becoming a key challenge. The green skills gap calls for companies to focus on up-skilling and training employees to take on sustainability-linked roles. The ability to scale up and do so quickly is a further challenge. Businesses that were more advanced in change management and digitalisation prospered during the pandemic. Likewise, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the urgency to be more sustainable and resilient, for example, by not relying on gas coming from Russia. Companies now need to face similar challenges head-on, understand the impacts and adjust strategies accordingly.

Companies with policies aimed at improving employee health and safety, employee training, or having safety management systems positively influence safety performance, which in turn has a positive impact on financial performance.

(Source: ScienceDirect, 2024)

Use safety as a performance driver

Safety is often the unsung hero of good performance. The benefits of a good safety management programme mean production will be less impacted due to fewer accidents. Plus, fewer accidents mean fewer legal issues. Improving ergonomics provides a healthier workplace environment. Good safety management can also improve mental health. By managing these impacts, companies can achieve higher satisfaction in the workplace which can result in better performance and encourages people to engage with a company's vision and strategy. Companies need to improve their understanding of the positive effects of safety on performance.

Tell stories and listen

Data is an important driver that helps companies identify their most significant impacts, providing valuable insights into what is needed to improve. However, data needs to be supported by stories because it can be hard to quantify how company efforts impact people's livelihoods, how they empower marginalised communities or achieve impacts in the safety, sustainability and operational excellence contexts. This approach also helps all stakeholders improve understanding of the full range of impacts that companies aim for. It's also important to listen – there is a lot of co-creation to be achieved by really listening to all stakeholders so that impacts are identified and understood across the business.

75%

of leaders increased their investments towards a sustainable future in the past year, with

20%

significantly increasing their investments.

(Source: <https://www.travelperk.com/>, 2023)

What's next

While safety, sustainability and operational issues continue to dominate the business landscape, are we now at a crossroads where a fresh approach is necessary? To remain relevant, companies should review these key business functions and assess what alternative approaches and trends should be taken into account.

Joining the dots

The arrival of sustainability as a critical business issue sheds new light on the need to remove business function silos. As we learn from the thoughts and ideas of our female leaders, there is a vital connection between business functions. Applying a best practice approach to keeping people safe and healthy, caring for the environment and local communities, and aiming for operational excellence all work towards the same outcome; a thriving company. Success in one area is no longer enough. Companies must take a more holistic approach and join the dots between all three functions to improve the long-term outlook.

Harnessing technology

Technology and digitalisation are no longer optional in today's business world. Machine learning and artificial intelligence have increased the choice and pace at which technology can now achieve goals. However, there are different stages of maturity within the business landscape. Safety and operations already use many technological tools to improve programmes and processes. In contrast, the technology to drive forward sustainability is still in its early stages. As well as continuing to explore a rapidly changing landscape, companies should not overlook any overlap in technology and digitalisation that can be adapted and applied across all three functions.

Putting people first

People are the lifeblood of any company. But how many companies have yet to walk the talk and truly put people first? While safety records are seen as a proxy for a company that cares for its employees, the arrival of sustainability means companies are now more widely scrutinised on how they treat their workforce, those in the value chain and local communities. Putting people before profits is not a natural or easy transition for businesses. However, companies that can point to enriched health and safety programmes, strive for operational excellence, and are on the way to building a pathway to a more sustainable business model will gain a competitive edge.

As we look forward, businesses must have the flexibility and resilience to pivot solutions and ideas to embrace new opportunities and face the inevitable challenges ahead. Those companies that support a holistic approach, harness technology and put people first will be in the best position to achieve long-term success.

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People are the lifeblood of any company. But how many companies have yet to walk the talk and truly put people first? As we look forward, businesses must have the flexibility and resilience to pivot solutions to embrace new opportunities and face the inevitable challenges ahead.”

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All leadership stories are available on:
www.consultdss.com

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