

Leader Profile: Mag O'Keeffe

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Did you have a plan in how you shaped your career?

I began my career with a clear motivation to become an engineer, which shaped my early choices. However, I didn't anticipate the path my career would ultimately take. Over time, I learned that adaptability is just as important as planning, and it has been a key factor in how I've shaped and sustained my career.

What were the key milestones on your journey?

Looking back, a few milestones stand out. First was building credibility as an engineer—that technical foundation earned trust and respect. Next came management: learning to run teams, delegate, and understand people. From there, I shifted to indirect management, influencing across areas and regions without direct authority—a very different challenge.

The biggest leap was moving from management to leadership: no longer managing tasks, but guiding skilled professionals, shaping a vision, and honing influence. Finally, I've learned that leaders always cast a shadow—your integrity, consistency, and daily actions have an impact far greater than you realise.

What barriers or challenges did you encounter, and how did you overcome them?

I've encountered a few key challenges along the way. The first was learning to pivot. The world is full of uncertainties, and my career took me across many functions. Things rarely go exactly as planned, so developing adaptability - being able to pivot quickly - was essential.

The second was resilience. In any career, you're constantly facing change and unexpected hurdles. I've learned that resilience is like a muscle: it builds over time through experience. For me, resilience has been about focusing on the long road, not just the storm or challenge in front of me.

And the third challenge was building confidence in myself. At times, I had to remind myself that someone believed in me enough to offer the role. That perspective helped me trust my ability to solve problems, adapt, and grow. Self-belief has been critical in moving forward.

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What role did others play in your career journey? (e.g. mentoring, sponsorship, cheerleaders, role models)

Others have played a huge role in my career, and I tend to think about their influence in four groups: mentors, sponsors, cheerleaders, and role models.

Mentors share expertise that accelerates your learning curve. Whether in leadership or technical skills, I've always sought mentors who challenge me and push me to grow faster.



Sponsors are different. They understand your strengths and value, and they're willing to advocate for you when opportunities arise. Those relationships take effort—sponsors need to know both your abilities and your blind spots—but they've been critical to my progression.

Cheerleaders may not hold influence, but they provide encouragement and positivity. A simple "great presentation" or "that really landed with me" can make all the difference. Leadership can sometimes feel lonely, and that support helps when you're making the hard, not easy, decisions.

Finally, **role models**. Some inspire me through their entire leadership style, others through a single quality I want to emulate. They remind me of the leader I aspire to be.

What were the most important development milestones leading to your current role? (specific roles, education, opportunities)

The first was developing a strong understanding of the business—our customers, products, and financial drivers. That foundation made me more well-rounded in my decisions and actions.

The second was gaining experience across many different functions. I've worked in new product introduction, R&D, operations, and quality. Each role gave me a different perspective and together they provided a much more complete view of the business.

And the third was learning to lead — regardless of function. Leadership isn't confined to a specific area—it's about influencing, setting direction, and empowering people. That shift in mindset was a major milestone in shaping who I am as a leader today

Advice to companies on how to attract more women into your industry

For companies looking to attract more women into roles, my advice would be to focus on a few key areas.

First, build strong recruitment practices. That means being deliberate in how you source talent, ensuring diverse interview panels, and looking for women in areas or roles that may not have been historically diverse.

Second, showcase visible role models. When women see others like them succeeding, it creates aspiration and belief that they too can thrive in those roles.

Third, be very intentional in how you design and promote roles. Pay attention to job descriptions and the characteristics you highlight—sometimes the language alone can make a role feel more or less accessible.

And **finally**, foster a truly supportive work environment. Life brings many challenges, and creating a culture where people feel supported, included, and free from bias—both conscious and unconscious—makes a huge difference.

Advice to women on progressing in industries and roles where women are not equally represented

My advice to women looking to progress in industries or roles where they're underrepresented is simple: do it anyway. Don't let the lack of representation stop you—be the person who sets the path for others.

It takes courage and the willingness to trail blaze, But the most important step is to take the opportunity and go for it. By stepping into those roles, you not only grow yourself, but you also become a role model for the women coming after you.

So my advice is: just do it. Be bold, be resilient, and know that by doing so, you're opening doors for others as well as yourself.

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