MULHERES INSPIRADORAS

“I see the role of Women in Leadership evolving in a promising way”

SOME LEADERS STAND OUT FOR THEIR VISION, OTHERS FOR THEIR COURAGE — AND THEN THERE ARE THOSE WHO DISTINGUISH THEMSELVES BY THE WAY THEY MANAGE TO BALANCE BOTH QUALITIES IN A LEADERSHIP STYLE THAT IS UNIQUE, AUTHENTIC, AND TRANSFORMATIVE. SILVIA RODRÍGUEZ, FOUNDER & CEO OF VANILLA PROJECT, BELONGS UNEQUIVOCALLY TO THIS LATTER GROUP.

Her journey, built on determination, innovation and a profound human understanding, reveals an approach to leadership that is as solid as it is sensitive.
In this interview, Silvia Rodríguez shares her vision on the importance of empathy in the business world, the importance of leading with purpose, and the constant challenge of balancing sensitivity and firmness in an increasingly competitive landscape. A conversation that inspires, enlightens, and reinforces the impact that genuine leaders can have on people, teams and organisations.

Vanilla Project was born from a very personal and distinctive vision. Which moments, along your personal and professional path, do you consider to be decisive in shaping the leader you are today? Was there any specific challenge that made you realise you were ready to lead?

Founding Vanilla came from a desire to use creativity as a tool for transformation.
I have always believed that communication plays an essential role in the way we think and act as a society. I wanted to create a space where brands could develop projects that not only convey knowledge and raise awareness, but also spark debate and mobilise people towards real impact in our societies. I felt the urge to create Vanilla shortly after the Estoril Conferences in 2022, which I had the pleasure of leading as Executive Director — one of the most renowned events in Portugal, with a new management under Nova SBE that year. With the main theme “The Purpose Generation: Becoming the Changemakers of Tomorrow”, the challenge was to engage students and the international network of CEMS schools through parallel events taking place simultaneously in four cities around the world. It was undoubtedly a landmark moment in Portugal, leaving an impact and legacy that still endures today.

What does ‘lead with purpose' mean to you? In what ways is this purpose reflected in the DNA of the Vanilla Project — in strategic decisions, team culture and client relationships?

For me, to lead with purpose means having a clear vision of the impact we want to generate in the world and ensuring that every decision — big or small — is aligned with that intention. Leading with purpose is not a slogan nor a beautifully written manifesto; it is a daily practice, at times challenging, that requires coherence, courage and understanding.
This purpose is embedded in Vanilla’s DNA, it serves as a filter for everything we do. At a strategic level, it guides us in selecting projects and partnerships: we only work on initiatives that add value to society and align with our values of creativity, impact and responsibility. We prefer to grow sustainably rather than compromise what we believe in.
Within the team, purpose translates into a culture of collaboration, curiosity and creativity. I encourage people to question, to bring different perspectives, and to explore unconventional solutions. But we also promote emotional responsibility, transparency, and the idea that everyone plays an active role in building the impact we aim to create.
With clients, purpose is reflected in the way we work: we do not simply seek to deliver a service, but to build long-term partnerships, challenging ideas and co-creating solutions that hold social and cultural relevance. We want every client to feel they are contributing to something greater — and that Vanilla is the ideal strategic partner to get them there, rather than just a supplier. Ultimately, leading with purpose ensures that Vanilla is not defined solely by what it does, but by why it does it. And when that ‘why’, is part of every dimension of the organisation, impact stops being occasional and becomes structural, leaving a legacy embedded in the clients’ own DNA and their teams.

Despite progress, many women still face obstacles when pursuing top leadership positions. What kind of barriers did you feel throughout your journey as a woman entrepreneur and CEO, and how did you turn them into motivation to keep moving forward?

Although the industry is changing, it is undeniable that women continue to face setbacks when aspiring to leadership roles. In my experience, I have felt many of these obstacles, from the constant need to prove competence in contexts where women’s voices were underestimated, to the difficulty of being taken seriously when presenting more innovative or ambitious ideas. Often, the same characteristics that are perceived as leadership in men — assertiveness, vision, high standards — are interpreted differently when expressed by women.
Additionally, when we grow within an ecosystem where few women lead companies or negotiate at the highest level, it unintentionally creates a sense that we are stepping into a territory that, in some way, was not made for us. The truth is, I transformed those barriers into energy. Each obstacle made me realise that this was precisely why my presence mattered. Instead of shaping myself to expectations, I used them to strengthen my identity as a leader. I learnt to turn these challenges into opportunities to surprise, and into moments to create new paths.

Leadership often requires balancing empathy with assertiveness. How would you define your leadership style, and in what ways do you believe women bring a unique sensitivity to management and decision-making?

For me, leadership is about finding the balance between empathy and assertiveness. Empathy allows me to truly understand people, their motivations and their challenges.

aBut at the same time, I believe in the need for assertive leadership — clear in its expectations, firm in its decisions, and able to move forward even when consensus is not possible, without ever losing direction or ambition.
My leadership style is strongly purpose-driven. I like involving teams in building ideas, giving space to different voices, and creating a culture of transparency and shared responsibility. But when difficult decisions must be made, doing so with conviction and integrity is essential.
As for the role of women, I believe there is a particular sensitivity that has historically been under-recognised but is now proving essential. Many women bring sharper emotional intelligence, a strong ability to integrate diverse perspectives, and a broader view of the implications of decisions — all of which contribute to more balanced and resilient organisations.

Who have been — and continue to be — your greatest female role models? And how do you believe your own example can inspire other women to become entrepreneurs or take on leadership roles?

My greatest female role models are leaders who have proven that it is possible to transform how we understand power. Regardless of political ideologies, Jacinda Ardern is one of my greatest inspirations — not only for her ability to lead in moments of immense complexity, but for showing the world that empathy, transparency and humanity are not signs of weakness, but of strength. Her “different kind of power”, so well described in her recently released book, demonstrates that sensitive yet firm leadership can redefine political and social cultures. I am also inspired by management models based on the principles of conscious capitalism, which combine profit with purpose and social impact. These models show that it is possible to align financial sustainability with social responsibility, with companies playing a crucial role as active agents of change. I hope that the way I lead and build can inspire others to believe they do not need to choose between ambition and sensitivity, between impact and growth, or between purpose and results.

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SILVIA RODRIGUEZ

I believe the most powerful example is to show, with authenticity, that it is possible to build companies that balance creativity, innovation and social impact — and that women have a central role in shaping that future.

At Vanilla Project, how do you promote a culture that values diversity, equal opportunities and the voice of women within the team? What impact does this diversity have on the company's innovation and creativity?

Diversity is a pillar of our culture and a driver of innovation. We value multidisciplinary and collaborative teams, we believe different perspectives generate richer ideas and more complete solutions. We promote equal opportunities and creative freedom, ensuring that every voice contributes its vision to the final outcome. This diversity is visible in every project, and it is what enables us to create experiences with purpose and relevance.

How do you see the evolution of the role of women in leadership in the coming years, especially in sectors traditionally dominated by men? What changes do you still consider essential for equality to become a concrete reality?

I see the role of women in leadership evolving in an increasingly positive and promising way in the coming years, driven not only by the rise in women's qualifications and ambition, but also by a growing awareness of the benefits of diversity in management and innovation.
But this is a journey that still requires awareness, commitment and structural change. We still live in a context where women's presence in top roles is far from parity, particularly in sectors historically led by men — a reality that calls for reflection and action.
In Portugal, women occupy 30% of management positions and only 27% of leadership roles within companies. When we look at top-level positions, such as general management or boards of directors, the numbers decrease even further.

What advice would you give to young women who dream of leading their own projects but still doubt their capacity or their place in the business world?

My advice is: believe in your voice and in your vision. Often, the biggest obstacle is our own selves. The world needs what each person has to offer — their creativity, courage and ability to build something unique. Do not wait for approval or for the perfect moment; what matters is to start with what you have, allow yourself to make mistakes, and surround yourself with people who challenge you and inspire you to pursue your dreams.
Leading your own project is not only about financial success; it is about generating impact, leaving a mark, and proving that there is room for different leadership styles. The more women dare to occupy these spaces, the easier it becomes for the next generations to believe they can do it too.



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