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Leading the Blue Future

Empowering the Next Generation of Water Leaders



Blanca Antizar

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Contents

Foreword by Glen and Patty Daigger . . . . . **xi**
Foreword by Cheryl K. Davis . . . . . **xiii**
Foreword by Inês Breda . . . . . **xv**
Preface . . . . . **xvii**
Acknowledgements . . . . . **xix**

Introduction: The urgent need for water leadership **1**
My Journey into Water Leadership 3
What This Book Offers 4
Exercise: Discover Your Leadership Why 5
As You Begin – Key Takeaways about Leadership 6

Part 1: Mindset 7

Chapter 1
The water leadership imperative **9**
A Defining Moment 10
Five Roles of Water Leadership 11
Visionary 11
Connector 11
Advocate 12
Innovator 12
Mentor 12
Exercise: Mapping your Leadership Role 13
Key Takeaways 14

Downloaded from iwaponline.com/ebooks/book-pdf/1637759/wio9781789065497.pdf
by guest

Chapter 2
Cultivating a water leader's mindset ***15***
The 2024 Valencia Floods in Eastern Spain 15
Why Mindset Matters More than Expertise 16
The Five Core Dimensions of the Water Leader's Mindset 16
1. Emotional Intelligence – Reading the Room When the Room is on Fire 17
2. Ethics and Integrity – The Decisions No One Sees (Until They Do) 17
3. Visionary Thinking – Holding the 50-Year Picture While Fixing Today's Leak 18
4. Resilience and Adaptability – The Art of Failing Forward 18
5. Humility Before Nature – Leading in a World You Cannot Control 18
Personal Reflection – The Night I Chose Their Success 19
Exercise: 30-Day Water Leader Mindset Challenge 21
Exercise: Mindset Diagnostic Quiz – Where Do You Need to Grow First? 25
Key Takeaways 26
A Water Leader's Mindset Manifesto 26

Chapter 3
Leading with vision in a crisis ***27***
Montevideo, May 2023 – The Day the Taps Turned Salty 27
What 'Leading With Vision in a Crisis' Really Means 28
The Four Phases of Visionary Crisis Leadership (a Reusable Framework) 28
Phase 1 – See Reality Without Panic 28
Phase 2 – Hold the Long View When Everyone Wants Short Cuts 29
Phase 3 – Turn Citizens into Co-Leaders 29
Phase 4 – Lock in the Gains Before the Crisis Fades 29
Personal Reflection – The Pandemic That Forced Us to Lead Without Leaving Home 29
Exercise: Your 100-Day Vision-In-Crisis Playbook 32
Key Takeaways 33

Part 2: Skills 35

Chapter 4
Securing funding for water innovation ***37***
The Year the Money Finally Arrived for Water That Didn't Exist Yet 37
Why Funding is the Make-or-Break Leadership Skill 38
The Hidden Truth About Water Funding in 2025 39
The Four Phases of Winning Big Funding 40
Phase 1 – Choose a Problem That Demands Action (Not Just Intention) 40
Phase 2 – Build the Consortium That Cannot Be Ignored 41

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Phase 3 – Write the Proposal That Reads Like a Love Letter to the Future 42
Phase 4 – Pitch, Follow Up, and Turn 'Almost' into 'Yes' 42
Personal Reflection – the €10 Million that Almost Slipped Away 43
Exercise: Your High-Value Funding Playbook 44
Template: Large Grant Proposal Skeleton 45
Key Takeaways 46
A Water Innovator's Funding Manifesto 46

Chapter 5
Building cross-sector collaborations **47**
The Day the Silos Finally Cracked 47
Why Collaboration is the Ultimate Water Leadership Skill 48
The Hidden Truth About Collaboration in Water 49
The Four Phases of Building Unbreakable Cross-Sector Collaborations 49
Phase 1 – Start with Shared Stakes, Not Shared Goals 49
Phase 2 – Design Governance That Rewards Contribution, Not Control 49
Phase 3 – Co-Create the First Small Win Together 50
Phase 4 – Institutionalise the Collaboration So It Outlives the Project 50
Personal Reflection – The Partnership that Almost Never Began 50
Exercise: Your Cross-Sector Collaboration Canvas 52
Key Takeaways 53
A Water Collaborator's Manifesto 53

Chapter 6
Driving digital transformation in water **55**
The Day the Data Saved a City 55
Why Digital Transformation is a Leadership Imperative 56
The Hidden Truth About Digital in Water 56
The Four Phases of Driving Digital Transformation 57
Phase 1 – Start with the Pain, Not the Technology 57
Phase 2 – Build Trust Before You Build Systems 57
Phase 3 – Pilot Fast, Learn Faster, Scale Smart 58
Phase 4 – Make Digital Part of the Culture, Not a Project 58
Personal Reflection – The Digital Pilot that Almost Died on Day One 59
Exercise: Your Digital Transformation Canvas 60
Key Takeaways 61
A Digital Water Leader's Manifesto 61

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by guest

Part 3: Application 63

Chapter 7

Case study: resilient utilities for the future ***65***

The Utility That Should Have Failed 65
The Leadership Dilemma: What Had to Stop 65
Three Inflection Decisions That Changed Everything 66
1. The Technical Inflection: From Reactive Repairs to Proactive Renewal 66
2. The Political Inflection: From Defensive Communication to Radical Transparency 67
3. The Cultural Inflection: From Hierarchy to Shared Ownership 67
Transferable Lessons from Global Projects 67
Exercise: Apply Three Leadership Lessons to a Local Utility 69
Key Takeaways 70
A Resilient Utility Leader's Manifesto 70

Chapter 8

Case study: circular economy in action ***71***

The Day the Regulators Said No – and We Kept Going 71
The Leadership Challenge: When Innovation Threatens the Status Quo 72
Three Leadership Moves That Made Circular Possible 73
1. The Regulatory Move: From Compliance to Co-Creation 73
2. The Financial Move: From Grant Dependency to Value Creation . . 73
3. The Relational Move: From Competition to Shared Ownership 73
The Scaling Moment: When Failure and Success Looked Identical 73
What This Teaches About Innovation Leadership 74
Exercise: Your Circular Economy Leadership Planner 75
Key Takeaways 76
A Circular Water Leader's Manifesto 76

Chapter 9

Case study: women leading water change ***77***

The Meeting Where No One Asked the Question That Mattered Most 77
What the Evidence Confirms 78
What the Sector Loses When Women Are Excluded – and Gains When They Lead 78
Three Leadership Interventions That Make Inclusion Real 79
1. Mentorship That Goes Both Ways 79
2. Policy Changes That Shift Power, Not Just Representation 80
3. Network-Building That Crosses Traditional Boundaries 81
One Inclusion Effort That Failed – And What It Taught 81
What This Teaches About Innovation Leadership 82
Exercise: Build Your Inclusive Network Map 84
Key Takeaways 85
An Inclusive Water Leader's Manifesto 85

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by guest

Part 4: Future Vision 87

Chapter 10
Your legacy as a water leader ***89***
The Day I Stopped Waiting For Someday 89
The Danger of 'Someday Leadership' 90
Three Legacy Horizons Every Water Leader Should Define Today. 90
1. The 90-Day Horizon – What will I start this quarter that proves I mean it? 90
2. The 5-Year Horizon – What will still be working because you choose to invest in it now? 90
3. The 25-Year Horizon – What will children born today inherit from my work? 91
What Not to Wait For 91
Personal Reflection – The Choice That Still Echoes 91
Exercise: Your Three-Horizon Legacy Plan 93
Key Takeaways 94
Your Legacy Manifesto 94

Conclusion: call to action for young and mid-career leaders **97**

The author **99**

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Foreword by Glen and Patty Daigger

Human civilisation is underpinned by effective water management, a universal truth consistently demonstrated throughout human history. All successful civilisations manage water to provide the services and necessities for human life. The way this is done depends on a diverse set of physical, climatological, economic, and social conditions. There is no single 'right' way to manage water, but the right one at any point in time for a particular civilisation is the one that works within the current circumstances. There are numerous examples throughout human history of civilisations adapting their water management to changing conditions and sustaining themselves, but many more where adaptation did not occur, and the civilisation eventually fell.

We are living in a time of accelerating change, with changes occurring in many dimensions. Unfortunately, in many locations water management practices have not changed fast enough, leading to widespread water stress and insecurity. Is this because we did not know what to do? It is not. **The incredible water challenges we face can all be solved.** How do we know this? We know it by the example of the many, but still the minority, of locations where they are being solved. Do we lack the means to change? We do not. **What is missing? Blanca gives us the answer: Leadership**.

What we need are more water leaders who not only understand what we need to do and how to do it but also empower themselves to develop relationships and consensus to move beyond what is comfortable and safe to what will actually work. But what is leadership? **Leadership is a skill, and a skill that all can master.** As with any skill, the first step is to understand the basic principles to effectively master it. This book masterfully introduces those skills. It describes them in a direct, easy-to-understand way and provides exercises to practice them. Then, what's next? Practice! Skills are acquired by practice. But what is also needed to practice when the initial trials can be a bit intimidating? The answer is inspiration, which Blanca also provides.

The world's water problems can all be solved. We can be the generation to do it. Yes, we will need money, institutions, increased capacity, and many things. But they are all available once we have the courage to lead. Where does

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leadership come from? From individuals who empower themselves to act, not because they are 'in charge' but because they simply act. If you are one such person, you need to read this book, take the skills and messages to heart, and then practice by leading.

Glen and Patty Daigger
Plymouth, Michigan, USA
Professor Glen T. Daigger is Former President, Distinguished Fellow and current Member of the Strategic Council of the International Water Association

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Foreword by Cheryl K. Davis

It's an honour to recommend Dr Antizar's new book on ***Leading the Blue Future: Empowering the Next Generation of Water Leaders***. Having entered the water industry in the 1980s, I know that the water leaders of today face challenges most water managers weren't aware of then. Few if any of us anticipated the complexity of the water quality, water supply, water workforce, environmental degradation, and climate challenges that lay ahead. Today we know more about the challenges but are still learning the skills we need to address them. Failure to grasp the seriousness of our situation can result in viewing the recruitment and development of individuals with diverse backgrounds as an equity issue that is not critical to our achievement of basic goals. In reality, we need to develop and fully utilise everyone's contribution in order to have any hope of meeting these challenges.

The International Water Association's Specialist Group on Sustainability in the Water Sector began its investigation of the role of women in the water industry after hearing the comments of **two young women** attending a workshop we led at the International Water Association's World Water Congress in 2018. **They said that the information provided in the workshop had been good, but that they would not be able to use it; their bosses wanted women to take orders, not suggest new ideas**.

We decided to learn more. Through a multi-year research project in which women in the water industry from around the world explained their experiences in their own words, we documented six major challenges: **career opportunities and advancement; disrespectful behaviour; self-confidence; impact of age on challenges experienced; work–life balance; and mentoring and staff development** (described in ***Women in Water: How to Support Everyone's Contribution***, IWA Publishing, 2024).

Dr Antizar's timely new book is directly relevant to these challenges, providing practical ideas and suggestions that can help members of the water

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industry make the best possible use of their own talents, while encouraging the contributions of others. We all need to learn from each other, and we can all learn from her experience.

Cheryl K. Davis
San Francisco Bay, California, USA
Former senior leader at the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission, serving in multiple management and executive roles for over 35 years and Distinguished Fellow of the International Water Association

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Foreword by Inês Breda

5pm. We are walking outside with a glass of iced tea. I hear the heels striking the pavement. (click) The day has been long. (clack) We have been inside a room since 8 am trying to decide how to formalise this partnership. (click) The water sector is full of whales. (clack) And somehow reconnecting a passionate advocate with a classic technical engineer executive seems close to impossible. (click)

We have discussed everything there is to discuss. (clack) We wrote down a plan, a list of roles and responsibilities. (click) I have every detail I need to write a contract. (clack) But something is missing.

(click) There is fear and anxiety in the air. (clack) Expectations of failure. Lack of trust. (click) **Trust cannot be built in a contract.**

(clack)

Wait a second. They are talking to each other. Walking behind me, sharing what is going on in their lives, projects that excite them. (click) Now this is something I can work with. (clack) Like a symphony, I adjust the pace of my walk to meet the tempo of their conversation. (click) I let them speak. (clack) Until I find my cue.

(stop)

I look back and whisper: 'And that is exactly why we need you both to drive change.'

Silence. Followed by a hopeful nod from both parties. I raise my glass and say: 'Let's do it for the river.' 'Let's do it for the river.' 'Let's do it for the river.' And just like that, the contract was signed. The rest was just formalities.

The book you are about to read feels like a gift, carefully hand-wrapped to guide you towards conscious leadership. This was the book I needed five years ago. And the book I need today. A book that kindly asks you to accept a truth that is sometimes easier to forget: the change we want to see is within our reach.

At a time of misinformation, geopolitical instability, and questions on climate agendas, the noise feels overwhelming. We feel powerless. But Blanca dares you to let go of that dark room and take intentional accountability for the rooms you are in.

Your work matters.

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Your contributions to the sector are not measured in scientific publications or standing ovations. If you take an honest look at yourself, you will find how to drive change. **Most of the times it is not a loud moment. It is just a timely whisper.** So, take the time to stop. And seek those moments.

A gentle warning: Blanca will talk about her achievements. After reading the third one, I caught myself thinking: would I even consider this bragging if this book had been written by a man? **I am not used to hearing women share what they have accomplished.** Shame on me for thinking it was out of place. Women have been doing extraordinary work for this sector. It is more than fair that we share our experience.

Reflective. A must-read for young professionals. A welcome read for seniors. An inspiring read for women in water. A guide to shaping intentional careers, one that asks us to move from eyewitnesses to conscious actors of change.

Inês Breda
Senior Director, Head of Sustainability,
GRUNDFOS Holding A/S, Denmark
Former Young Water Professionals Steering Committee
Member of the Strategic Council of the International Water Association
IWA Fellow

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Preface

This book did not begin as a plan. It began as a reflection.

After years working across countries, projects, and partnerships in the water sector, I found myself returning to the same question: *what actually makes change happen*? Not in theory, not in strategy documents, but in the messy reality where infrastructure, politics, communities, and human behaviour intersect.

Again and again, the answer was not only technical. It was leadership.

Not leadership defined by titles or hierarchy, but by moments, often small, often uncomfortable, where someone chose to act differently. To listen instead of defend. To collaborate instead of compete. To move forward despite uncertainty.

This book is an attempt to capture those moments.

It brings together lessons from practice: from innovation projects navigating uncertainty, from utilities under pressure, from cross-sector collaborations that almost failed, and from conversations that changed the direction of entire initiatives. It is also shaped by the people behind those experiences: colleagues, partners, and young professionals, who continue to challenge how this sector thinks and acts.

I did not write this book as a technical manual. There are already many excellent resources that explain *what* needs to be done in water; from infrastructure investment to digital transformation, from circular economy to governance reform.

This book focuses on something different: *how leadership shows up when those changes need to happen*.

It is written for early and mid-career professionals; those who are already contributing, often without formal authority, and who are trying to navigate complexity, uncertainty, and sometimes frustration. You may feel underprepared or constrained by systems that move slowly. You may wonder whether your voice is strong enough to influence change. This book is written with you in mind.

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At the same time, it is also for more experienced leaders; those who recognise that the challenges we face today cannot be solved with yesterday's approaches, and who are willing to reflect on how they show up in moments that matter.

The structure of the book follows a simple progression: from mindset, to practice, to application, and finally to legacy. Each chapter combines real-world stories, practical reflections, and exercises designed to translate ideas into action. You will not find perfect answers here. What you will find are patterns; ways of thinking and acting that have helped move projects forward when conditions were far from ideal.

This book does not ask you to become a different kind of person. It asks you to become more intentional about the leader you already are.

If it helps you take one step, one conversation, one decision, one action, that you might otherwise have postponed, then it has served its purpose.

Blanca Antizar

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Acknowledgements

This book exists because of people who, in different ways, shaped how I see water, leadership, and the responsibility we carry within this sector.

First, to my family, for their patience, encouragement, and quiet strength across the years. In particular, to my mother, whose love of reading first opened the world to me. This book is, in many ways, a continuation of the stories we shared, and a small attempt to capture some of the ones I did not have the chance to tell her.

To the many colleagues, partners, and collaborators I have worked with across countries and contexts, including utilities, startups, researchers, policymakers, and community leaders; thank you for your trust, your honesty, and your willingness to engage in difficult conversations. Much of what is written here has been learned alongside you, often in moments of uncertainty, disagreement, and shared ambition.

To the young professionals I have had the privilege to train and mentor, and who have mentored me back, thank you for your courage to question, to challenge, and to imagine a different future for the water sector. Your energy and clarity are a constant reminder that change is not only necessary, but possible.

To the networks and communities that continue to push this sector forward, particularly those working to build bridges across disciplines, sectors, and perspectives, thank you for creating spaces where new ideas can take root and grow.

Finally, to those whose voices are still too often missing from the room, particularly women, young leaders, and underrepresented communities; this book is also for you. Your perspectives are not an addition to the conversation; they are essential to it.

Any insights in these pages are the result of shared journeys. Any shortcomings are entirely my own.

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Note on Anonymity and Storytelling

The personal stories, case studies, and examples in this book are drawn from my three decades of experience in the global water sector. To protect the privacy of individuals, organisations, and projects, I have anonymised or altered certain details, including names, locations, timelines, and specific circumstances. Some narratives have been combined or simplified for clarity and impact.

While every effort has been made to preserve the essential truth and lessons of these experiences, not all details are factually verbatim. Any resemblance to specific real-world events or entities beyond the broader circumstances described is unintentional.

This book is intended as a practical guide to water leadership, not a historical or journalistic record.

Cover illustrations

The cover illustrations are based on original drawings by Clara Turrion-Antizar, awarded First Runner-Up at the ICE IKIGAI Creative Arts Festival 2024 (Institution of Civil Engineers). Reproduced with permission.

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Introduction: The urgent need for water leadership

Nearly three-quarters of the world's population now live in countries classified as water-insecure or critically water-insecure. Around 4 billion people experience severe water scarcity for at least one month every year. In many regions, water-related risks are no longer marginal; they are systemic. Climate change is rewriting the rules of flood and drought; cities are growing faster than pipes can be laid; women and girls in too many places still walk hours for water that can make them sick; and invisible threats (e.g., 'forever chemicals' like polyfluoroalkyl substances, pharmaceutical residues, and antimicrobial-resistant compounds) are seeping into even the sources we thought were safe.

But the crisis is no longer just about abundance, scarcity or pollution.

We have entered what global scientists now call the **era of Global Water Bankruptcy**[1] – a moment when societies are living beyond their hydrological means. In many basins and aquifers, long-term water use has exceeded renewable inflows and safe depletion limits. Rivers no longer reach the sea. More than half of the world's large lakes are shrinking. Wetlands have been liquidated on a continental scale. Aquifers are collapsing beneath cities and farmland. Glaciers (the 'water savings accounts' for hundreds of millions) are disappearing faster than they can be replenished.

This is not a temporary emergency. It is a structural imbalance; a post-crisis condition where the natural capital that once buffered us has been damaged beyond realistic prospects of full recovery.

[1]Madani K. (2026). *Global Water Bankruptcy: Living Beyond Our Hydrological Means in the Post-Crisis Era*. United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH), Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada, https://doi.org/10.53328/INR26KAM001

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And yet, the science is clear: many proven solutions already exist, from nature-based treatment to digital leakage detection, and new technologies are emerging to tackle challenges that once seem unthinkable. Delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals will require sustained investment at an unprecedented scale, amounting to trillions of dollars globally over the coming decades.[2,3] Yet repeatedly, projects stall or fail not because the technology does not work, but because people, institutions, and incentives remain disconnected.

The gap is not knowledge or technology.

The gap is leadership.

Even with the best technologies and the largest budgets, nothing transformative happens without the courage to align stakeholders, the vision to bridge sectors, and the persistence to turn resources into reality.

Water leadership is not simply generic leadership theory applied to a technical sector. It is a discipline of its own.

Unlike leadership in most industries, water leadership operates on timescales that stretch across generations, under conditions of deep uncertainty, and within systems where failure is not an option. Decisions made today can shape ecosystems, public health, and social stability decades from now. Water leaders must work across political cycles, national borders, and institutional silos; often with incomplete data, competing priorities, and hydrological realities that no longer resemble the past.

Most leadership books focus on managing organisations.

Water leadership is about stewarding shared resources, balancing human needs with ecological limits, and making ethical choices when trade-offs are unavoidable. It demands not only technical understanding, but emotional intelligence, cultural fluency, and the ability to build trust across disciplines and power structures.

This book is written for that reality.

Leadership is not missing in general. What's missing is yours: stepping forward, right now, in your role, your organisation, your corner of the water world.

This book is written for you: the emerging water leader ready to turn urgency into action. Whether you are a 25-year-old engineer in your first job, a mid-career manager weighed down by stalled progress, a scientist turned entrepreneur chasing the next breakthrough, or a seasoned expert who wants to pay it forward; you belong here.

If you have been in this sector for a while, you may also recognise a quieter truth: caring deeply about water can be exhausting. You may have watched promising projects stall, funding cycles reset, or political priorities shift just as

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[2]Hutton G. and Varughese M. (2016). *The Costs of Meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Targets on Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene*. World Bank. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/publication/the-costs-of-meeting-the-2030-sustainable-development-goal-targets-on-drinking-water-sanitation-and-hygiene (accessed April 2026).

[3]OECD (2024). *Embedding Water-related Risks in Financial Stability Frameworks: Full Report*. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/embedding-water-related-risks-in-financial-stability-frameworks_ee1757f9-en/full-report.html (accessed April 2026).

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momentum was building. You may feel responsible for outcomes you cannot fully control or frustrated by systems that reward caution over courage. None of that means you have failed; it means you have stayed long enough to see how hard this work really is.

This book does not ask you to work harder or carry more alone. It is an invitation to lead differently: with clearer boundaries, deeper alliances, and a renewed sense of purpose rooted in what can be influenced, starting where you are.

Through stories from my own journey, from early research on polluted beaches to leading global consortia and large multistakeholder consultancy projects across continents, and lessons drawn from decades of practice, I invite you to see yourself not as an eyewitness to the water crisis, but one that this sector urgently needs.

The urgency of water leadership cannot be overstated. Climate change is reshaping the planet's water cycle, delivering more extreme floods in some regions and deeper, longer droughts in others. Rapid urbanisation continues to outpace infrastructure. Emerging contaminants threaten even treated supplies. And now, the degradation of natural water capital, specifically aquifers, wetlands, glaciers, soils, is pushing entire regions into irreversible decline.

Solutions exist (e.g., proven technologies, innovative delivery models, and dedicated funding streams), but they remain fragmented across silos, sectors, and borders. What is missing is not expertise, but leadership capable of connecting ideas, people, resources, and political will at scale.

Water leadership is not optional.

It is imperative.

And it requires a new generation (**your generation**) willing to step forward.

MY JOURNEY INTO WATER LEADERSHIP

When I began my career, I believed technical expertise alone would be enough. I had trained rigorously, studied intensively, and entered the sector with confidence in my knowledge. Yet I soon discovered that the most transformative projects rarely failed for lack of science; they faltered for lack of human connection.

Early on, I found myself in multi-stakeholder initiatives where the data was impeccable, but collaboration crumbled. Utilities guarded their operational realities, small and medium enterprises pushed bold new tools, governments weighed political risks, investors calculated returns, and non-governmental organisations defended the voices of the unheard. Everyone spoke past one another. Progress stalled not because of technical barriers, but because no one was truly listening. In those frustrating moments I realised leadership was the missing ingredient; not authority or titles, but the quieter arts of bridging divides, framing shared purpose, and holding steady when uncertainty threatened to scatter us.

From shaping innovation programmes and forging public–private partnerships to advising utilities under international financial institutions, I learned that true leadership is about listening deeply, creating space for others

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to thrive, and translating diverse perspectives into collective action. Above all, it demands resilience through setbacks, humility before complexity, and the stubborn refusal to quit when people's access to clean water and sanitation hangs in the balance.

This book distils those hard-won lessons, earned across continents, cultures, and crises, into practical tools, frameworks, and stories you can adapt to your own path.

WHAT THIS BOOK OFFERS

This book will equip you with the complete toolkit to become the water leader the world needs today, across four interconnected dimensions:

- **Mindset:** building emotional intelligence, ethical clarity, visionary thinking, resilience, and humility before nature (Chapter 2)
- **Vision in crisis:** leading with purpose and long-term perspective when everything is at stake (Chapter 3)
- **Practical skills:** mastering funding strategies, cross-sector collaboration frameworks, and digital transformation (Chapters 4–6)
- **Application and legacy:** real-world case studies of leadership in action and guidance on crafting your own enduring impact (Chapters 7–10)

Every chapter weaves personal stories from my journey with actionable frameworks, exercises, templates, and clear takeaways. You will not simply read about leadership, the invisible infrastructure (Figure 1); you will practise it, adapt it to your context, and begin applying it immediately.



Figure 1 Water leadership is invisible infrastructure.
Visible water outcomes are built on invisible leadership behaviours, which in turn rest on the leader's mindset.

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EXERCISE: DISCOVER YOUR LEADERSHIP WHY

Leaders who cannot articulate their 'why' are the first to burn out when the pressure rises.

Take a moment to reflect and write your answers below:

1	Three reasons why you care about water: 1. 2. 3.
2	One specific challenge (e.g., in your community, organisation, or the wider sector) that motivates you to act:
3	Combine them into your personal leadership statement. Begin with: *My leadership why is…*
4	Optional reflection (for honesty, not perfection). One experience, barrier, or moment that has almost made you give up, and what it taught you:

This statement is your anchor. Keep it visible. Revisit and refine it as you move through the book.

The challenges you named, including the moments that tested your commitment, are not weakness. They are part of the leadership story you are already living.

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AS YOU BEGIN – KEY TAKEAWAYS ABOUT LEADERSHIP

- Water leadership is urgent, global, and deeply personal.
- It is not about titles or seniority; it is about mindset, courage, and the quiet determination to keep going when others might walk away.
- You already belong in this story; whether you are just starting out or have decades of experience, your voice and actions matter.

I have written this book the way I wish someone had handed it to me 30 years ago: with honesty about the setbacks and the doubts, practical tools that work in the real world, and living proof that one committed person, acting with vision, empathy, and persistence, can change an entire watershed.

The chapters ahead will challenge you, equip you, and remind you why you chose this sector in the first place.

Leadership is not a destination.

It is a daily practice.

And now it is your turn to practise it.

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Part 1

Mindset



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Chapter 1

The water leadership imperative

Water leadership is unlike any other form of leadership on Earth. It sits at the intersection of climate, public health, politics, engineering, science and justice; a place where decisions shape not quarterly results, but generations. It demands technical competence and the ability to navigate uncertainty, balance competing interests, and act with courage when the stakes are highest. When water leaders fail, ecosystems collapse, communities suffer, and futures shrink. When they rise, entire regions thrive.

This chapter defines the leadership ground rules for everything that follows.

Water leadership stands apart because every choice echoes across systems and generations. A shift in energy policy can reshape agricultural demand; a national decision can alter the health of entire basins downstream. It is also a profound equity challenge: billions of people worldwide still lack access to safely managed drinking water services,[4] and the heaviest burdens fall on women and marginalised communities, and those with the least political voice. And in a world of accelerating climate extremes, leaders must plan for scarcity and excess simultaneously. These realities, systemic interconnection, social justice, and climate resilience, form the foundation of the **Water Leadership Imperative**. They show why leadership in this sector cannot be reactive, isolated, or short-sighted. They are the lens through which every decision in this book should be understood, the connective tissue that strengthens communities in crisis, and the spark that enables bold innovation when opportunity emerges.

[4]WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene (2023). *Progress on household drinking water, sanitation and hygiene 2000–2022: Special focus on gender.* World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Geneva. Available at: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240076921 (accessed April 2026).

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A DEFINING MOMENT

Early in my career I joined a high-profile international partnership tasked with remediating groundwater polluted by toxic industrial chemicals. The region was already water-scarce, and every stakeholder, including industry, regulators, utilities and academics, came with their own priorities, constrains, and unspoken tensions.

I was responsible for developing a roadmap to demonstrate a credible in-situ clean-up approach. I saw it as a defining opportunity and moved quickly. After days of technical work and multiple rounds of discussion with partners, we reached an agreement. The roadmap was sound. Robust, elegant, even.

Then we presented it to the decision makers, and the meeting unravelled.

Technically, the roadmap was flawless. Strategically, it was incomplete. What I had labelled 'out of scope' (i.e., political realities, cultural sensitivities, long-term governance, and trust), suddenly became the only things that mattered. My confidence collapsed in real time. I felt exposed, unprepared, and acutely aware of how much I did not yet understand.

At that point in my career, pressure came from every direction. I was far from family and friends, working in a language that was neither my first nor my second, immersed in a different culture during a period of regional conflict. I navigated tense conversations about religion and rights, while constantly having to prove my credibility in rooms filled with scepticism.

What changed everything was not a technical correction, but a single, honest conversation.

I understood then that progress was not driven by technical solutions alone, nor by academic excellence. It required listening, real listening, to perspectives shaped by history, culture, power, and lived experience. My role was not to compete over whose technology was best, but to contribute to a solution that could endure, social, politically, and across generations integrating (indigenous) community knowledge.

That shift transformed frustration into collaboration, and collaboration into breakthrough.

The lesson I carried forward was simple and demanding; setbacks are inevitable, but they are also where possibilities multiply, particularly if we persist, adapt, and stay open to others.

Looking back, that experience reshaped how I understood leadership in the water sector, and the difference between being an expert, a manager, or a leader (Figure 2).

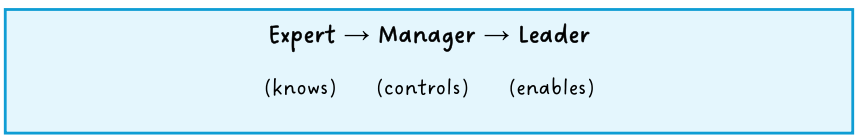


Figure 2 The water leader's role shift.
Effective water leadership moves from solving problems personally to creating the conditions for others to solve them.

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Across projects, countries, and career stages, I saw the same pattern repeat; effective water leadership did not come from hierarchy, job titles, or personality types, but from the roles people stepped into when systems were under strain. Over time, five such roles stood out; roles that emerged across continents and crises, and that consistently transformed outcomes regardless of seniority, budget, or organisational structure.

FIVE ROLES OF WATER LEADERSHIP

Interdependence demands **Connectors** and **Mentors**.
Equity demands **Advocates**.
Resilience demands **Visionaries** and **Innovators**.

These five roles (Visionaries, Connectors, Advocates, Innovators, Mentors), are not fixed identities or personality types, nor are they tied up to seniority. Most water leaders move between them over time, sometimes within a single project, sometimes across different phases of their career. Early on, you may lead primarily as a **Connector** or **Innovator**; later, your greatest impact may come as a **Mentor** or **Advocate**. Leadership growth is not about choosing one role forever, but about recognising what the moment demands and stepping into it with intention.

These roles are simply five ways water leaders show up in the real world; available to anyone willing to step forward.

Visionary

Visionaries look beyond the urgency of today to imagine systems that will still be resilient decades from now. They articulate what is possible and help others see how each small step contributes to that larger future. Their courage lies in challenging assumptions and refusing to accept '*the way things have always been done*'. In the groundwater consortium, one such leader reframed the work from a short-term clean-up effort to a long-term aquifer stewardship programme. That single shift changed everything: regulators became open to phased solutions, industry accepted longer responsibility horizons, and funding was secured for monitoring what would otherwise have been cut. What had seemed like an impossible deadlock began to move.

Connector

Connectors are the bridge-builders on the water world. They listen deeply, translate across disciplines, and turn mistrust into cooperation. In multi-stakeholder projects, where utilities, small and medium enterprises, regulators, investors, and non-governmental organisations often talk past one another, a single skilled connector can shift the room from deadlock to shared purpose. I once watched a quiet facilitator unlock 12 months of stalled wastewater negotiations in under four weeks, not by forcing agreement, but by reframing each stakeholder's risk in a language that everyone could finally understand. Momentum built up, the pilot of the innovative technology started, which was successful, and the technology was subsequently adopted by the water sector.

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Advocate

Advocates refuse to let equity sit on the margins. They ensure that women, youth, rural communities, and marginalised groups are not only present but influential in decision-making. They combine technical credibility with moral clarity, reminding everyone that water is a human right long before it is an economic input. I have seen an Advocate's persistence transform an entire rural water programme from '*build more boreholes*' to '*design systems women can operate and maintain with local resources and respecting local communities' cultures*'. That shift reshaped thousands of lives, not for a project cycle, or a single community, but for generations.

Innovator

Innovators look at broken systems and ask, '***What if we tried something different***?' They pilot digital tools in fragile utilities, test unconventional financing models, or invent low-cost sensors that work where formal procurement reaches a bottleneck. Their strength lies in turning curiosity into practical solutions that scale. In one small coastal utility, the true innovator was not the consultant or the engineer; it was the technician who quietly assembled a functioning sensor from spare components when the official equipment never arrived. His ingenuity kept the project alive.

Mentor

Mentors are the quiet multipliers of the sector. They strengthen every other role by investing in people, not just projects. In conflict zones and overstretched utilities, I have watched senior professionals take anxious 25 year olds under their wing, teaching not only technical skills, but how to stay grounded when everything around them is failing. Years later, those same young leaders are running utilities, shaping policy, and mentoring others in turn. One act of mentorship can protect an entire watershed for decades. Never underestimate the legacy created when you invest your time for someone else.

Together, these **five roles** form a practical framework for water leadership in action. You will see them woven throughout this book in case studies, exercises, and your own reflections, because they capture ***how leadership truly emerges*** when water systems are under pressure.

Chapter 2 will help you build the mindset needed to step into these roles, and Chapter 3 will challenge you to apply them when the stakes are high and certainty is low.

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EXERCISE: MAPPING YOUR LEADERSHIP ROLE

Which role feels most present for you right now?

There is no perfect choice: leadership grows through practice, not certainty.

Visionary	setting bold directions
Connector	building bridges across silos
Advocate	championing equity and justice
Innovator	driving new solutions
Mentor	nurturing the next generation

Choose one (or more):

Then ask yourself:
What would it take to step into this role just 10% more intentionally over the next year?

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I have included a summary table of the five roles of water leadership (Table 1). Return to it as often as you need.

Table 1 The five roles of water leadership at a glance.

Role	Core Strength	When It Matters Most
Visionary	Seeing long-term possibilities; reframing challenges as system-wide opportunities	When crises demand direction; when stakeholders are stuck in short-term thinking; when a project needs a unifying future-oriented narrative
Connector	Building trust, translating across disciplines, aligning diverse actors	When collaboration stalls; when silos block progress; when misunderstandings or mistrust threaten momentum
Advocate	Centring equity, justice, and inclusion; amplifying underrepresented voices	When decisions risk marginalising communities; when gender, youth, or indigenous perspectives are missing; when ethical trade-offs arise
Innovator	Experimenting, prototyping, and adapting solutions under constraints	When systems are failing; when traditional approaches no longer work; when low-cost or rapid solutions are needed
Mentor	Developing people, strengthening confidence, and multiplying leadership capacity	When teams face uncertainty; when young professionals need support; when long-term resilience depends on growing others

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Water leadership is shaped by three defining realities: interdependence, equity, and resilience.
- Technical solutions succeed only when supported by trust, courage, and genuine collaboration.
- Leadership in water is not about position; it is about how you choose to show up when systems are under strain.
- Every professional, at any career stage, can step into one or more leadership roles today.
- The world does not need expertise alone; it needs people willing to lead from exactly where they are.

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Chapter 2

Cultivating a water leader's mindset

THE 2024 VALENCIA FLOODS IN EASTERN SPAIN

On 29 October 2024, eastern Spain was devastated by catastrophic floods that claimed more than 220 lives and erased entire communities within minutes. A once-in-a-century Isolated Depression at High Levels, or *DANA* in Spanish, unleashed over a year's worth of rain in just a few hours, overwhelming rivers and ravines (*barrancos*) and reclaiming floodplains long encroached upon by urban development.[5]

Spain's meteorological agency, *AEMET*, had issued early warnings. Hydrological models accurately predicted rainfall intensity and overflow points. Emergency budgets were approved, and resources such as the military emergency unit (*UME*) were already on standby. On paper, the system was prepared.

But in the critical 48 hours before peak flooding, coordination between national and regional authorities broke down. Some officials questioned the forecasts; others waited for instructions that never came. A few local mayors, however, adopted a different mindset: they treated the warning as a call to act, not a probability to debate. They went door-to-door in *barrancos* and low-lying neighbourhoods; and in doing so, saved hundreds of lives.

What ultimately changed the outcome was not new funding or better technology, but how a handful of leaders interpreted the situation. That moment crystallised something I had witnessed many times but never named clearly: mindset, more than expertise, determines whether leaders act when it matters most. Data alone did not save lives; the willingness to act on it did.

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[5]Chavda S. (2024). *The 2024 Spain Floods: Failures in Early Warning, Action, Coordination, and Localisation*, PreventionWeb (Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction), 2 December 2024. Available at: https://www.preventionweb.net/news/2024-spain-floods-failures-early-warning-action-coordination-and-localisation (accessed February 2026).

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WHY MINDSET MATTERS MORE THAN EXPERTISE

In Chapter 1, we explored the five roles water leaders can step into: Visionaries, Connectors, Advocates, Innovators, and Mentors. **Mindset is what makes those roles possible**. It determines whether you rise to meet uncertain and limited authority, or retreat when silence feels safer.

Technical brilliance can design the perfect pipe. Mindset determines whether anyone will fund it, maintain it, or share it fairly.

Water work is defined by permanent uncertainty: climate models with wide error bars, political cycles shorter than infrastructure lifespans and communities that have been promised too much for too long. Without a grounded mindset, even the most capable engineers, policymakers, and scientists burn out, compromise their values, or walk away.

With the right mindset, obstacles become raw material, and ordinary professionals become the leaders the world is waiting for.

Before we explore each mindset dimension in depth, it is worth naming the patterns that quietly derail even the most committed water leaders (Figure 3). These traps are subtle, familiar, and entirely human, and recognising them is the first step towards leading with clarity under pressure.

Common Mindset Traps in Water Leadership

- **Perfectionism:** waiting for perfect data before acting.
- **Over-responsibility:** carrying burdens that should be shared.
- **Technocratic detachment:** focusing on models over people.
- **Crisis fatigue:** losing sight of long-term purpose under pressure.

Figure 3 The mindset traps that quietly undermine water leadership.
These common traps quietly erode judgment and confidence, weakening a leader's ability to act under pressure.

THE FIVE CORE DIMENSIONS OF THE WATER LEADER'S MINDSET

These ***five dimensions*** are not isolated traits you either have or lack. They form an interconnected mindset that shapes how water leaders interpret uncertainty, respond to pressure, and make decisions when no option is risk-free. Strengthening one dimension reinforces the others; neglecting one weakens the whole.

They are the foundation that makes the leadership roles from Chapter 1 sustainable under real-world pressure.

To see how these dimensions operate in practice, we will explore each one through lived examples and simple habits that build leadership strength over time: (i) **Emotional intelligence**; (ii) **Ethics and Integrity**; (iii) **Visionary Thinking**; (iv) **Resilience and Adaptability**; (v) **Humility Before Nature** (Figure 4).

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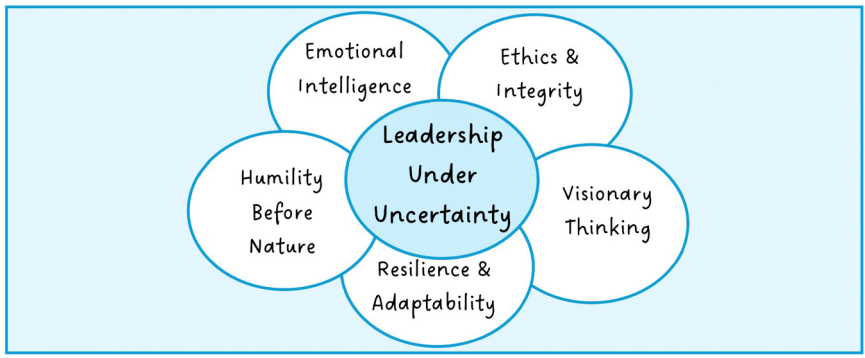


Figure 4 Five Dimensions of the water leader's mindset.
Leadership under uncertainty emerges where emotional intelligence, ethics, vision, resilience, and humility before nature overlap.

1. Emotional Intelligence – Reading the Room When the Room is on Fire

Self-awareness and empathy are not 'soft skills'; in water leadership they are survival tools. Emotional intelligence is your ability to recognise your own state, sense what others might be feeling, and respond in ways that build trust rather than fracture it. Without it, even the strongest technical plan can trigger resistance, fear, or backlash.

A former colleague once described watching a technically flawless tariff reform almost collapse because a senior manager dismissed a grandmother's fear that new prices would mean she could no longer bathe her grandchildren. The spreadsheets were impeccable; the communication was not. Only when the team slowed down, listened, and built the clear protections for low-income households did the community begin to accept the change.

Practices to build it:

- Name your own state before difficult conversations.
- Scan the room: who looks tense, silent, or confused?
- Ask one more question when someone resists: '***What worries you most***?'
- Debrief with honesty: how did my tone or body language shape the outcome?

2. Ethics and Integrity – The Decisions No One Sees (Until They Do)

Ethics in water leadership is not abstract. It is the daily discipline of protecting people and ecosystems even when shortcuts look tempting. Integrity is what anchors a leader when political, financial, or organisational pressure mounts.

I once worked with a utility team under intense pressure to declare a treatment plant 'fully compliant' before it truly was. The political cost of delay was high. But one mid-level engineer refused to sign off. Her quiet insistence on accuracy forced a difficult conversation, delayed the announcement by two weeks, and ultimately prevented a public-health incident. Few people ever learned her name, but her integrity protected an entire community.

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Practices to build it:

- Name your non-negotiables and revisit them before major decisions.
- Slow the moment: ask for five minutes to review the facts again.
- Seek a second perspective from someone who will tell you the truth.
- Document your reasoning to strengthen clarity and accountability.

3. Visionary Thinking – Holding the 50-Year Picture While Fixing Today's Leak

Visionary thinking is the ability to look beyond immediate crises and imagine systems that will still serve communities decades from now. It is not about grand speeches; it is about connecting today's decisions to tomorrow's consequences.

In one drought-stricken region, a project team kept arguing over short-term emergency measures. Progress stalled. Then a young planner reframed the conversation: '*What would a water-secure region look like in 2050, and which of these actions move us toward that*?' That single question shifted the debate from firefighting to long-term resilience. The plan that emerged later became the backbone of the region's adaptation strategy.

Practices to build it:

- Ask the long question: '***What does this mean in 10, 20, or 50 years?***'
- Use scenario thinking to test decisions against multiple scenarios.
- Map how other sectors, for example, energy, agriculture, climate, and finance intersect with your work.
- Protect thinking time, for example, one hour a week for strategic reflection.

4. Resilience and Adaptability – The Art of Failing Forward

Resilience is not endurance at all costs. It is the ability to recover, learn, and adapt when plans collapse; because in water, they often do. Adaptability is the willingness to adjust course without losing sight of purpose.

During a major digital-meter rollout, a utility discovered mid-deployment that the chosen technology failed in high-humidity zones. Instead of hiding the issue or forcing the rollout through, the project lead paused, convened the team, and redesigned the deployment strategy. The delay was painful, but the adapted approach saved millions and restored trust.

Practices to build it:

- Normalise setbacks: ask: '***What is this teaching us***?'
- Build recovery rituals: walks, debriefs, or team check-ins.
- Stay flexible: hold your purpose tightly, your methods lightly.
- Celebrate early course-corrections; they prevent bigger failures later.

5. Humility Before Nature – Leading in a World You Cannot Control

Humility before nature is the recognition that water systems are larger, older, and more complex than any model or plan. It keeps leaders grounded, curious, and cautious, especially when the data looks certain.

Across many flood-risk exercises and real-world operations I have researched, similar dilemmas have emerged: models indicating safe water levels, teams

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debating whether evacuation is necessary, and one hydrologist urging caution because '*the catchment is behaving differently this year.*' In those moments, acting despite the model's confidence has saved lives. These experiences, repeated across countries and contexts, show us that humility is not hesitation; it is the discipline of assuming we might be wrong and acting early enough to protect people.

Practices to build it:

- Assume uncertainty: treat every forecast as a range, not a guarantee.
- Listen to anomalies; field staff often sense shifts before instrument do.
- Respect local knowledge; communities notice patterns long before models catch up.
- Stay curious: ask: '***What might we be missing***?', especially when the data looks perfect.

PERSONAL REFLECTION – THE NIGHT I CHOSE THEIR SUCCESS

These five dimensions are not abstract ideas for me. I learned them the hard way; long before I was able to name them.

During my early career years, I often felt frustrated. Very often at work meetings I was the youngest, and only woman in the room, the foreigner whose English carried a Spanish accent. I remember that feeling at the start of a new project of not having the strength of keep going. Then I opened my notebook and wrote to myself: '*Tomorrow I will care more about their success than about being right*'.

Then I kept writing. Two pages, addressed to the Chair of the working group. I stopped talking about '*my*' project, or '*my*' ideas, and started writing about '*our*' responsibility and '*our*' legacy. I sketched an inclusive work plan that created space for every person who had ignored me, naming where their expertise was indispensable.

The next morning, I walked to the secretary's office, I humbly but determined, handed over the document I have prepared to be given to the Chair, and waited for his response.

At noon I was called in. The Chair read in front of me my work plan, in silence; looked up and told me that he will approve it.

One of the initiatives in the plan required a nationwide stakeholder meeting. He asked me to organise it with a particular request: to invite the very man who had been the hardest on me to chair that stakeholder meeting; not me, but him. I did as I was requested, with no questions asked. He accepted. He chaired. And something shifted in the room that day.

I took the back seat, yet everyone knew whose quiet determination had made the space possible. Strangers approached me afterwards to say, '*thank you for not giving up*'. Within weeks the same men who had looked past me for so long, were pulling up chairs so I could sit beside them. A four-page feature appeared in the local technology press with my name in the headlines.

The full work plan was successfully implemented, and the project received national and international awards.

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That night, after the stakeholder meeting, I realised that mindset is not a theory you study on Sunday. It is the trembling, 2 a.m. choice you make on Monday when every part of you wants to run, and you decide to stay, not for your ego, but for the water and the people who need it, and the wider environment, for **your purpose**.

That night also taught me that leadership begins when ego steps aside.

I share this story not because it is unique, but because it is ordinary in ways that matter. Most water leaders face moments when their competence is invisible, their commitment is tested, and their easiest option is to walk away. The mindset you cultivate in those moments (not your title, credentials, or brilliance) determines whether progress continues or quietly dissolves.

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EXERCISE: 30-DAY WATER LEADER MINDSET CHALLENGE

Mindset is not built in theory; it is built in practice. This 30-day challenge is designed to help you strengthen one dimension at a time; gently, consistently, and in ways that fit the realities of your life.

Week 1 – Emotional Intelligence
Day 1
Emotion I noticed in someone else
How I responded
Day 2
Emotion I noticed in someone else
How I responded
Day 3
Emotion I noticed in someone else
How I responded
Day 4
Emotion I noticed in someone else
How I responded
Day 5
Emotion I noticed in someone else
How I responded

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Week 2 – Ethics
Decision I faced
Cutting-corners option
Hard right I chose
Decision I faced
Cutting-corners option
Hard right I chose

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Week 3 – Vision
One paragraph of my 25-year vision (rewrite or refine daily)

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Week 4 – Resilience
Feedback I asked for (scary topic)
What I learned
Feedback I asked for (scary topic)
What I learned
Feedback I asked for (scary topic)
What I learned

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EXERCISE: MINDSET DIAGNOSTIC QUIZ – WHERE DO YOU NEED TO GROW FIRST?

Score 1–5 (1 = rarely, 5 = always)

#	Question	Score				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I notice my emotions before they control my words or actions.					
2	I can name the emotion behind someone else's anger or silence.					
3	I have turned down something tempting because it felt wrong.					
4	My team would say I am transparent even when it costs me.					
5	I can describe my project's desired state in 2075 in one paragraph.					
6	I feel energised, not drained, by long-term uncertainty.					
7	When plans fail, my first instinct is curiosity, not blame.					
8	I regularly change my mind when new evidence appears.					
9	Rivers and reservoirs still make me feel wonder, not just collect data.					
10	I actively mentor or champion people who are not like me.					
	Add points per column					
	Total score					

Scoring: Add your points

40–50 Strong across the board → mentor others
30–39 Solid foundation → pick one dimension to sharpen
20–29 Honest starting point → begin the 30-day challenge today
Below 20 Courageous self-awareness → you are exactly where growth begins

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

As you close this chapter, a few truths are worth carrying forward:

- Mindset is the invisible infrastructure beneath every water solution
- Emotional intelligence, ethics, vision, resilience and humility before nature are leadership essentials; not personal preferences.
- Mindset is revealed under pressure and strengthened through deliberate practice.
- You do not inherit a leadership mindset; you choose and re-choose it daily.
- The water sector does not lack expertise. It lacks leaders willing to think, feel, and act differently.

A WATER LEADER'S MINDSET MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Pin it above your desk*)

Leadership begins on the inside.
This manifesto is your reminder: a compass for the days when clarity fades and pressure rise.

I choose to lead water, whether I am, with whatever influence I have, with deeper listening, fiercer ethics, longer vision, and the quiet, stubborn refusal to let setbacks have the last word. I choose this because the next generation deserves rivers that run clean, communities that trust again, and a planet that still remembers how to rain.

Your turn.
Start the 30-day challenge tonight.

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Chapter 3

Leading with vision in a crisis

MONTEVIDEO, MAY 2023 – THE DAY THE TAPS TURNED SALTY[6]

In June 2023 Uruguay declared a national water emergency. The Paso Severino Reservoir, lifeline for 1.9 million people in greater Montevideo, had fallen to 1.7% capacity. Intake pipes lay exposed in cracked mud. President Lacalle Pou went on television: '*We are in a complex situation… anything we can do to ease the crisis we will do.*'

The city that boasts South America's highest human-development index was about to become the first capital in the Americas to deliberately add seawater to drinking water. Sodium levels doubled past WHO limits. A cardiologist warned of devastating long-term health effects. The Health Ministry told pregnant women and heart patients: stop drinking from the tap.

Panic emptied supermarket shelves. Bottled-water sales rose 573%. Wealthy neighbourhoods hired tankers; the poorest queued for army trucks handing out two litres per person per day. Agricultural losses topped $1.2 billion. Rice and soy megafarms, some using many times the water consumed by the entire urban population, remained largely unrestricted, while households were fined for using garden hoses. These choices reflected long-standing governance structures rather than decisions made overnight; and the crisis exposed how unequal systems behave under stress.

Three years of *La Niña* had slashed rainfall from 1300 mm to 300 mm. The Casupá Reservoir, planned a decade earlier to cover 70% of demand, remained

[6]Martinez B. (2023). *Running dry: The battle for water security in Uruguay and why it foreshadows a greater issue*. Harvard International Review, 20 October 2023. Available at: https://hir.harvard.edu/running-dry-the-battle-for-water-security-in-uruguay-and-why-it-foreshadows-a-greater-issue (accessed April 2026).

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unfinished. Former President José Mujica spoke for many: '*We all fell asleep*.' On 31 May activists marched chanting '*It's not drought, it's pillage*.'

Yet amid the despair, a handful of leaders refused to see the crisis as temporary. A young OSE engineer demanded diversified sources. An opposition senator crossed party lines to push emergency legislation. Women in the hardest-hit *barrios* became leak detectives and equity enforcers. They debated the Neptune desalination project and new laws that would finally put human needs above industrial excess.

When the rains returned in August, politicians claimed victory. The quiet leaders knew the truth: the reckoning had only just begun.

Most people involved were competent, well-intentioned, and operating under extreme pressure, which is precisely why crisis leadership deserves such careful attention.

Many managed the emergency. Very few led the future.

Crises do not create leaders.

They reveal them, and then they create followers.

WHAT 'LEADING WITH VISION IN A CRISIS' REALLY MEANS

Visionary crisis leadership is not a personality trait, a job title, or a moment of brilliance. It is a discipline, a set of choices that can be practised long before a crisis arrives, rehearsed under pressure, and applied at any scale. Whether you are responsible for a nation's water supply or a single treatment plant, the same principles apply.

Most people manage crises. Visionary water leaders lead through them towards a future that is stronger, fairer, and more resilient than what existed before the emergency began.

They do not ask, '*How do we survive the next 90 days*?'

They ask, '*What must we refuse to lose, and what can we finally fix, while the old rules are suspended and people are ready to change*?'

To answer those questions, leaders need a structure, a way to navigate the chaos without losing sight of the long view. That structure is captured in the four phases that follow.

THE FOUR PHASES OF VISIONARY CRISIS LEADERSHIP (A REUSABLE FRAMEWORK)

These phases are not new competencies to acquire in the middle of an emergency. They are the practical expression of the mindset cultivated in Chapter 2 and the leadership roles introduced in Chapter 1, activated when the stakes are highest and time is shortest.

You do not need to master all four at once; awareness comes first.

Phase 1 – See Reality Without Panic

Mindset link: Emotional Intelligence + Humility Before Nature

Practice: Name the worst-case scenario out loud, calmly, and then ask, '*What is the watershed asking of us right now*?'

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In Montevideo, leaders stopped arguing about whose fault the drought was and admitted together: '*We are days away from saltwater in the taps*.' That brutal honesty created the space for decisive action.

Phase 2 – Hold the Long View When Everyone Wants Short Cuts

Mindset link: Visionary Thinking + Ethics

In every crisis there are voices shouting, '*Just do whatever works this week*!' The visionary leader protects the reforms that will matter in 20 years, even when they are politically inconvenient today.

Practice: Write the one reform you will protect at all costs and share it publicly before the crisis peaks.

In Uruguay the opposition senator who co-sponsored the new water law knew he would be accused of helping the government. He did it anyway, because the next drought would not care about election cycles.

Phase 3 – Turn Citizens into Co-Leaders

Mindset link: Connector + Advocate

Crises strip away bureaucracy and fear of participation. Visionary leaders hand the microphone to people who have never had one.

In Montevideo's poorest *barrios*, women who had never been invited to a technical meeting suddenly became the neighbourhood's leak detectives and fairness enforcers. Ownership replaced resentment.

Phase 4 – Lock in the Gains Before the Crisis Fades

Mindset link: Resilience + Mentor

Memory is short.

When the rain returned to Uruguay, many wanted to declare victory and go back to normal. The visionary leaders insisted on writing the new rules into law, budget lines, and institutional habits while political will was still high. They knew the next drought would come, and this time the city would be ready.

You may move through these phases unevenly, revisit them repeatedly, or hold more than one at once. What matters is not linear perfection, but conscious intent (Figure 5).

PERSONAL REFLECTION – THE PANDEMIC THAT FORCED US TO LEAD WITHOUT LEAVING HOME

These phases are not theoretical. I learned them in real time, under conditions none of us had prepared for.

January 2020. I had just taken on the most complex project of my career: a truly multinational initiative with water utilities and regulators in more than 10 countries, four continents, five languages, and as many ways of working. We were scheduled to spend the year flying between continents, building trust over coffee and site visits.

Then the world stopped.

I returned from what turned out to be one of the last permitted international trips with a fever and the first cough of COVID. Borders slammed shut behind

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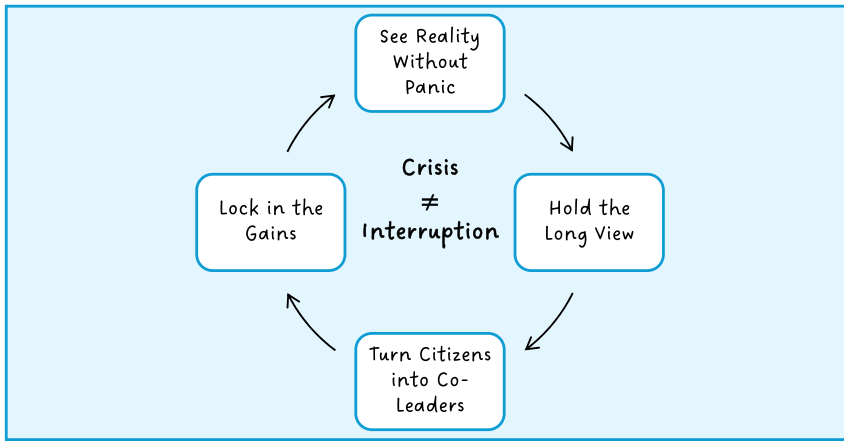


Figure 5 The four phases of visionary crisis leadership.
Crises demand a repeating cycle of seeing reality clearly, holding the long view, mobilising people, and locking in progress.

me. Within weeks some of our partner utilities lost half their staff to illness; or worse. Junior colleagues sat alone in one-bedroom apartments staring at screens, some mourning parents, friends or colleagues, others terrified they would be next.

Everything we had planned, workshops, field missions, handshakes, evaporated overnight.

For three nights I did not sleep. Cancelling felt impossible; the project was designed to help utilities become more resilient, and resilience was suddenly the only thing that mattered in the world. Yet continuing the way we had planned was equally impossible.

After several difficult conversations with colleagues and clients, we made a shared decision that became the new soul of the project: we would not pause, and we would not pretend nothing had changed. We would deliver something better than originally planned, using only the tools the crisis had left us, which were phones, video calls, and raw human determination.

I rewrote every workstream around three promises I made to the team and to myself:

(1) No one will be left behind because they are junior, or sick, or grieving.
(2) Every utility still able to work will be heard, even if their camera is off and their child is crying in the background.
(3) We will not just survive COVID; we will emerge with tools and relationships that make the sector stronger for the next shock.

We negotiated new deadlines to allow everyone to contribute. We moved site visits into virtual reality and supported all the stakeholders who were themselves in quarantine. We held 'empathy hours' instead of steering-committee meetings.

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These were optional calls where people could simply talk about what they were losing and what they still had to give.

It took longer than the original plan. Some deliverables and activities changed shape entirely. But when we finally closed the project, participating utilities told us that the collaboration forged in the darkest months of the pandemic had become the strongest professional relationships of their careers.

The crisis did not pause the project.

It revealed what the project had always been about: people choosing, day after day, to lead with vision when it would have been easier to hide.

Vision was not clarity; it was commitment

What made the difference was not my role, but the permission the crisis gave everyone to lead, once the vision was clear and fear was named rather than ignored.

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EXERCISE: YOUR 100-DAY VISION-IN-CRISIS PLAYBOOK

You do not need a crisis on the horizon to complete this exercise. Answering these questions now, imperfectly, privately, and without pressure, builds the muscle memory that matters when clarity is hardest to find.

Phase	My Answer Today (write it now, update when the crisis hits)
1. See Reality Without Panic	What is the worst-case scenario I refuse to sugar-coat?
2. Hold the Long View	What reform or value will I protect even if it costs me politically or personally right now?
3. Turn Citizens into Co-Leaders	Who has been silent until now that I will hand the microphone to?
4. Lock in the Gains	What new rule, budget line, or habit must be written in stone before the crisis fades?

Fill this table today. Keep it at hand. When the emergency sirens sound, you will not need to invent vision, you will only need to remember it.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Crises do not interrupt leadership; they reveal it.
- Visionary crisis leadership looks beyond survival towards fairness, resilience, and long-term reform.
- Four phases guide action under pressure: see reality without panic, hold the long view, turn citizens into co-leaders, and lock in gains before memory fades.
- Crisis leadership is learnable, scalable, and rooted in the same mindset practised in calmer times.
- When fear is loudest, vision becomes a moral responsibility.

The next drought, flood, or pandemic is already on its way.

When it arrives, '*will you retreat into survival mode*?' Or '*will you claim whatever influence you have to protect what matters most and begin shaping what comes next*?'

Choose now.

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Part 2

Skills



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Chapter 4

Securing funding for water innovation

THE YEAR THE MONEY FINALLY ARRIVED FOR WATER THAT DIDN'T EXIST YET

2020 was the year I thought I might die. Three visits to A&E, the constant dread that this time I would not come home, the nightly television tally of deaths by country. And yet, as soon as I was back home, I kept opening my laptop, because the team needed work, the water sector needed solutions, and innovation does not pause for personal fear.

It was a brutal year for funding. My boss asked a few times if we should step back, pivot to safer ground. Each time I said no. I kept writing proposals; late nights, weekends, holidays haunted by phone calls across time zones. Rejections arrived fast, some lingered in silence.

Then, on the last day of 2020, an e-mail arrived from the funding organisation: ***'Congratulations! Your proposal has been selected for funding.'***

My heart stopped. I read the e-mail three times, then shared it with the team. Within weeks three more new award messages followed. Four projects. Millions secured for innovations that, months earlier, had existed only in documents and sleepless imaginations. None of it felt heroic at the time. It felt necessary.

Those months had been unrelenting: midnight business models, unreachable partners, budgets rebuilt when a key small and medium enterprise nearly withdrew, clients suddenly short of cash. Yet in the final hours we refined relentlessly – foregrounding gender equity in water management and circular principles that would protect vulnerable communities for generations.

The funding did not land because we were the smartest.

It landed because we refused to give up, because we learned to speak the language funders needed: urgency wrapped in hope, risk wrapped in evidence, profit wrapped in purpose.

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That year taught me the hardest truth about water innovation: **the best ideas die quietly unless someone is willing to fight for the money that brings them to life**.

WHY FUNDING IS THE MAKE-OR-BREAK LEADERSHIP SKILL

Securing funding is not about charisma, seniority, or insider access. It is a craft; one that can be learned, practised, and improved through repetition, feedback, and resilience. Many of the most successful fundraisers I know began as deeply uncomfortable writers and reluctant negotiators. What they shared was not confidence, but commitment.

Funding is how leaders translate responsibility into reality.

Most brilliant water solutions never leave the laboratory or the pilot site. They die in a drawer marked '*great idea – no budget*'. We celebrate invention (e.g., the new sensor, breakthrough membrane, clever algorithm), but invention is only the beginning. Innovation is adoption at scale: changed behaviour, policy, balance sheets.

Between them lies the **valley of death,** where prototypes run out of money before proving viability (Figure 6).

Securing funding is that bridge. It is not bureaucracy; it is visionary leadership: turning conviction into capital and belief into budget lines.

But the scale of the challenge is hard to ignore. Achieving the water, sanitation, and hygiene targets of SDG 6 will require an estimated **US $1.7 trillion in additional capital investment by 2030,** roughly **three times current spending levels**.[7] At the same time, **water receives less than 3%**

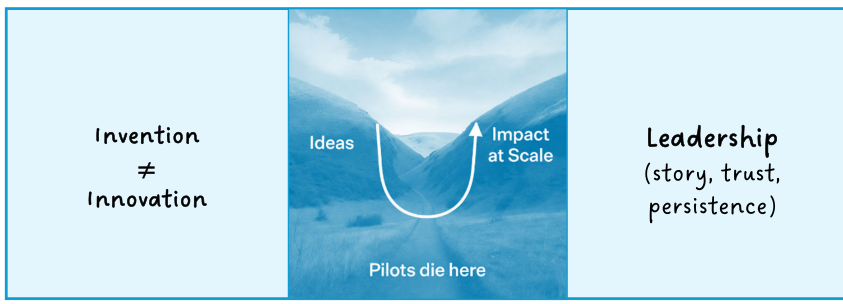


Figure 6 The valley of death (and the leadership bridge).
Most water innovations fail between pilot and scale unless leadership bridges the gap with trust, narrative, and persistence.

[7]World Bank (2023). *The Costs of Meeting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Targets on Drinking Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene*. World Bank, Washington, DC. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/water/publication/the-costs-of-meeting-the-2030-sustainable-development-goal-targets-on-drinking-water-sanitation-and-hygiene (accessed April 2026).

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of global climate finance,[8] even though it underpins food security, public health, energy systems, and ecosystem resilience. Traditional public budgets are flat or shrinking, leaving a widening gap between ambition and available resources.

This is why the future of water innovation depends on **bankable, investable projects;** proposals that can attract grants, blended finance, and patient private capital. The good news is that funders are actively looking for credible, equity-driven, system-changing ideas. The money exists. The real question is whether we are ready to step forward and claim it.

THE HIDDEN TRUTH ABOUT WATER FUNDING IN 2025

While many examples in this chapter draw on large competitive grants, the principles apply equally to municipal budgets, utility business cases, corporate innovation funds, philanthropic grants, and blended finance facilities. Regardless of scale, every funding request asks someone to believe in a future that does not yet exist.

By 2025, the funding landscape for water innovation had become a study in contrast. Water remains chronically underfunded relative to its importance: global capital continues to flow far more readily to energy transition, transport, and nature-based solutions. Meanwhile, broader water-related infrastructure needs (from treatment plants to stormwater systems), are projected to reach around US $6.7 trillion by 2030.[9]

Yet, paradoxically, more capital than ever is seeking impactful water projects. The European Green Deal,[10] the US Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act,[11] China's ecological civilisation commitments,[12] and corporate net-zero strategies

[8]Climate Policy Initiative (2024). *Global Landscape of Climate Finance 2024*. Climate Policy Initiative, London. Available at: https://www.climatepolicyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Global-Landscape-of-Climate-Finance-2024.pdf (accessed April 2026).

[9]OECD & World Bank (cited in World Economic Forum, 2025). *Global water infrastructure investment needs are projected to reach US $6.7 trillion by 2030 and US $22 trillion by 2050*. Available at: https://www.weforum.org (accessed April 2026).

[10]European Commission, Directorate-General for Financial Stability, Financial Services and Capital Markets Union (2020). *The European Green Deal Investment Plan and Just Transition Mechanism*. Published 14 January 2020. Available at: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-green-deal-investment-plan-and-just-transition-mechanism_en (accessed April 2026).

[11]Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), U.S. Department of Transportation (2021). *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117-58)*. Published by the FHWA Environmental Review Toolkit. Available at: https://www.environment.fhwa.dot.gov/legislation/authorizations/IIJA.aspx (accessed April 2026).

[12]Dong L. and Chen H. (2025). China's path to a global ecological civilization: Concepts and practices for sustainable development. *Chinese Journal of Population, Resources and Environment*, **23**(3), 295–300. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cjpre.2025.07.001

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have unlocked hundreds of billions.[13] Development banks are piloting results-based financing,[14] blue bonds,[15] and resilience credits.[16] Impact investors are actively searching for opportunities that blend social return with financial sustainability.[17,18,19,20]

In this environment, the difference between scarcity and abundance is preparation. Funders back projects that are technically sound, politically feasible, financially viable, and above all, equitable. They support leaders who understand systems, not silos.

THE FOUR PHASES OF WINNING BIG FUNDING

The mindset cultivated in Chapters 1–3 (i.e., purpose, emotional intelligence, ethics, vision, and resilience), becomes most visible when money is on the line (Figure 7).

Phase 1 – Choose a Problem That Demands Action (Not Just Intention)

Mindset link: Advocate + Visionary Thinking

Funders read hundreds of proposals every cycle. The ones that stand out are rarely the most technically complex; they are the ones that make the reviewer feel something, for example, urgency, hope, even quiet outrage.

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[13]Social Sciences Division, University of Oxford (2021). *Net Zero pledges go global, now action needs to follow words*. Published 23 March 2021. Available at: https://www.socsci.ox.ac.uk/article/net-zero-pledges-go-global-now-action-needs-to-follow-words-oxford-eciu-report (accessed April 2026).

[14]World Bank (2022). *Program-for-Results Financing (PforR): Overview*. World Bank, Washington, DC. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org (accessed April 2026).

[15]World Bank (2022). *Seychelles Sovereign Blue Bond: A World Bank-Supported Initiative*. World Bank, Washington, DC. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org (accessed April 2026).

[16]Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) (2023). *Resilience Credits: A New Mechanism to Finance Climate Adaptation*. IDB, Washington, DC. Available at: https://www.iadb.org (accessed April 2026).

[17]Convergence (2023). *The State of Blended Finance 2023*. Convergence, Toronto. Available at: https://www.convergence.finance/resource/state-of-blended-finance-2023/view (accessed April 2026).

[18]Global Impact Investing Network (2023). *2023 Annual Impact Investor Survey*. GIIN, New York. Available at: https://thegiin.org/publication/research/2023-giinsight-series/ (accessed April 2026).

[19]International Finance Corporation (2021). *Investing for Impact: The Global Impact Investing Market 2021*. IFC, Washington, DC. Available at: https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2021/impact-investing-market-2020 (accessed April 2026).

[20]OECD (2019). *Social Impact Investment 2019: The Impact Imperative for Sustainable Development*. OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/social-impact-investment-2019_9789264311299-en.html (accessed April 2026).

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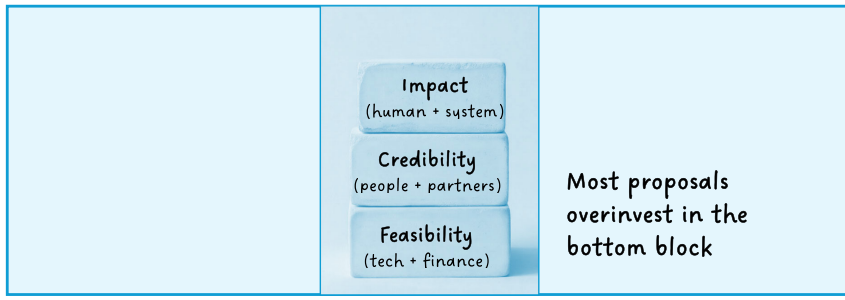


Figure 7 What funders actually evaluate.
Funders assess impact and credibility first, even though proposals usually overinvest in technical feasibility.

The discipline is to begin not with the innovation, but with the human harm or injustice the innovation exists to reduce; truthfully, respectfully, and without exaggeration.

Practice: Open every proposal with a vivid, personal vignette that connects the problem to a real life.

In one successful bid I could have led with sensors and algorithms. Instead, I began with my own childhood: the beautiful beach near my home where I swam every summer, until untreated wastewater clouded the water, filled it with foul smells, and stole that joy from an entire generation of children. The proposal became a promise: to deploy innovative real-time monitoring and nature-based treatment so that today's children, and their children, could swim there safely again.

The reviewers never forgot that beach.

Ask yourself before you write a single objective: '***What injustice or future risk can I not live with***?'

Phase 2 – Build the Consortium That Cannot Be Ignored

Mindset link: Connector + Mentor

Reviewers fund people as much as ideas. Their unspoken question is always: '*Will this consortium actually deliver*?'

The strongest bids are not the longest lists of partners. They are the ones that feel inevitable, blending research excellence, operational credibility, entrepreneurial agility, and lived experience from affected communities.

Practice: Map the 'missing voices' early and reach out personally, never with generic templates.

In one proposal we were stuck at 'good' on implementation because the consortium looked too academic and too Northern. The missing voice was the end-user utility, the organisations that would adopt the innovations.

I reached out directly to the innovation director of a major utility previously cautious about research partnerships. Instead of asking for a letter of support, I offered dedicated activities giving their teams early, low-risk access to prototypes

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and results, plus co-ownership of the data generated on their facilities. He joined. His track record, and the utility's reputation for scaling real solutions lifted our implementation and impact scores from 'good' to 'excellent'. The proposal crossed the funding threshold.

Years later that utility piloted one of the co-developed innovations under real conditions, which helped us win a highly competitive national award for water innovation, proof that the strongest consortia outlive the project itself.

Ask yourself: '***Who is the partner whose presence would make a sceptical reviewer think, yes! this will actually happen***'?

Phase 3 – Write the Proposal That Reads Like a Love Letter to the Future

Mindset link: Emotional Intelligence + Ethics

A proposal is not a form; it is a story of transformation. And you can use concrete techniques:

- The 'one grandmother' rule: every section must connect back to a real human impact.
- The impact pyramid: show results at Year 1 (pilot), Year 5 (scale), Year 20 (system change).
- The honest budget: never hide risks or overheads; transparency builds trust.

Practice: Write as if you are guiding a tired reviewer through a forest at sunset. Make the path easy to follow, not tangled. Short sentences. Clean logic. One idea per paragraph. Every page should answer the silent question: '*Why should I care*?' When reviewers feel guided instead of overwhelmed, they start to trust your proposal.

I learned the hard way to begin not with the proposal template, but with the reviewer's scoring form. Once I wrote to their criteria, clearly, simply, and without clutter, the feedback shifted from '*not included*' to '*explained exceptionally well*'. (In one resubmission, a reviewer even noted that the structure '*made the logic effortless to follow*'.) From then on, when we didn't secure funding, it was no longer because the proposal lacked clarity, but because another idea was simply stronger.

Phase 4 – Pitch, Follow Up, and Turn 'Almost' into 'Yes'

Mindset link: Resilience + Mentor

Submission is not the end; it is halftime.

Practice: Rehearse the two-minute elevator pitch until it feels like conversation. Prepare a one-page rebuttal for every possible weakness. After interviews, send personalised thank you notes that reinforce your unique value.

One consortium received feedback that our budget was 'too ambitious'. A calm, evidence-based response, plus a revised risk-mitigation plan unlocked additional budget in co-financing that made the risky demonstration site possible.

Equally important is knowing when to walk away. Some funding comes with conditions that compromise ethics, equity, or long-term impact. Mature

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funding leadership includes the courage to say no, and to trust that alignment matters more than speed.

PERSONAL REFLECTION – THE €10 MILLION THAT ALMOST SLIPPED AWAY

These phases are not theoretical. I learned them in moments when the stakes were painfully real.

I remember the day clearly. I had flown thousands of miles for a critical board meeting to secure approval for a long-delayed project amendment. The discussion was tense; partners had dragged their feet for months, putting our organisation at financial risk. By late afternoon we had agreement, and everyone headed to dinner.

I went back to the hotel room alone.

The deadline for a major multilateral tender was 9 a.m. the next day. I needed final sign-off on daily rates and the CEO's blessing to submit. I opened my laptop for one last review.

The video call connected. I walked him through the highlights. Then he asked the question that stopped my heart: ***'Is this worth pursuing? Will it be profitable?'***

Silence. My throat closed. After everything: the interviews with experts in countries I barely knew, the nights building an innovative maturity framework for utilities, the careful balancing of technical and financial proposals, it came down to this: profitability.

I took a breath.

> 'Yes, it will be profitable. But more than that, it is needed. This framework will help dozens of utilities prepare for climate shocks, protect millions of people, and save billions in future crises. The sector cannot wait.'

He listened. Then he nodded. The rates were approved. The tender was submitted on time.

That night taught me that funding is never just about spreadsheets.

It is about conviction strong enough to survive the last, loneliest conversation.

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EXERCISE: YOUR HIGH-VALUE FUNDING PLAYBOOK

Start filling this today. Keep it alive for every future bid.

Section	My answer today (fill now, refine forever)
The injustice I refuse to accept	
Three partners I will invite (even if they scare me)	1. 2. 3.
The one sentence that breaks the funder's heart	
The impact pyramid (Year 1 → Year 5 → Year 20)	Year 1: Year 5: Year 20:
My personal red line on ethics/budget transparency	

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TEMPLATE: LARGE GRANT PROPOSAL SKELETON

Before you start

- Read every guideline twice. Ask clarifying questions early.
- Map internal resources (time, legal support, finance team).
- Secure NDAs, commitment letters, and letters of support months ahead.

Understanding the call and evaluators

- Study previous funded projects and successful organisations.
- Align strictly with scope.
- Study evaluation criteria, thresholds, and weighting. Put yourself in the evaluator's shoes, and if possible, also ask a colleague to score a draft against the criteria.

Core content principles

Spell out clearly:

- **Why** this work matters and deserves priority.
- **What** you will do if funded.
- **How** you will do it; resources, timeline, availability required.
- **Who** will do it; consider their track record on similar work.

Key performance indicators (KPIs) and risk management

- Develop (or adopt) KPIs with monitoring processes.
- Identify risks (probability, impact) and mitigation strategies, even if not explicitly required.

Final polish and submission

- Check format requirements precisely.
- Use visuals thoughtfully (marketing team help).
- Ensure flawless spelling, grammar, and flow; even across multiple authors.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Funding is not luck or bureaucracy; it is leadership translated into commitment and resources.
- The most successful proposals combine technical excellence with human relevance and ethical clarity.
- Funders invest in consortia they trust to deliver, not just ideas they admire.
- Every rejection contains information that strengthens the next attempt.
- Water innovation does not fail for lack of ideas; it fails when leaders stop championing the resources to realise them.

A WATER INNOVATOR'S FUNDING MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it when the next rejection arrives.*)

I will no longer wait for permission or perfect conditions. I will become the kind of leader who turns conviction into consortia, stories into scores, and belief into balance sheets. Because the clean rivers, resilient cities, and healthy children we dream of will never be free, but they are always fundable, if someone is willing to champion them.

Your move.
Start filling the playbook tonight.

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Chapter 5

Building cross-sector collaborations

THE DAY THE SILOS FINALLY CRACKED

It was a freezing February morning in Brussels, 2019. I walked into a conference room expecting the usual: water utilities on one side of the table, tech startups on the other, regulators in the corner taking notes, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) quietly sceptical.

Instead, I found chaos; in the best possible way.

A utility director from Portugal was arguing passionately with a Dutch digital twin entrepreneur about data privacy. A Kenyan water-board chairman was sketching tariff models on a napkin with a German impact investor. A young woman from a Mediterranean NGO had just convinced a room full of engineers that gender-disaggregated data was not a 'nice to have' but essential for non-revenue water reduction.

No one was in their assigned seat. No one was waiting for permission to speak.

Six months earlier this same group had met for the first time and barely spoke. Utilities guarded their data like state secrets. Startups pitched products no one seem to need. Everyone left frustrated.

What changed? We stopped trying to '*align stakeholders*'. We started building a collaboration that felt like a movement.

Nothing about that day was accidental. The room layout, the agenda, the facilitation rules, and the decision-making structure had been deliberately designed to make hierarchy uncomfortable and contribution unavoidable. Collaboration did not emerge because people were unusually generous. It emerged because the system made collaboration the easiest option.

By the end of that February day, we had agreed on a shared demonstration roadmap across seven countries, co-funded data platforms, and a governance

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model that gave equal voting rights to utilities, SMEs, and other partners. The project strategy we agreed that year became one of the largest public–private water innovation partnerships that I have been involved in Europe, and it is still running today.

Cross-sector collaboration is not a box to tick.

It is the only way complex water challenges ever get solved.

Collaboration worked when leadership stopped controlling and started convening.

WHY COLLABORATION IS THE ULTIMATE WATER LEADERSHIP SKILL

Water problems refuse to respect organisational boundaries. A flood in one country becomes a drought downstream. A factory's wastewater becomes a community's drinking-water crisis. A city's smart meter rollout fails because rural women were never consulted on payment models.

Yet most of us are trained in silos: engineers in technology, policymakers in regulation, NGOs in advocacy, investors in returns. We speak different languages, measure success differently, trust slowly. This shift from silos to shared purpose is captured in Figure 8, where collaboration begins not with aligned interests but with a shared pain no single sector can solve alone (Figure 8).

The leader who can weave these worlds together does not just deliver projects.

They multiply impact exponentially.

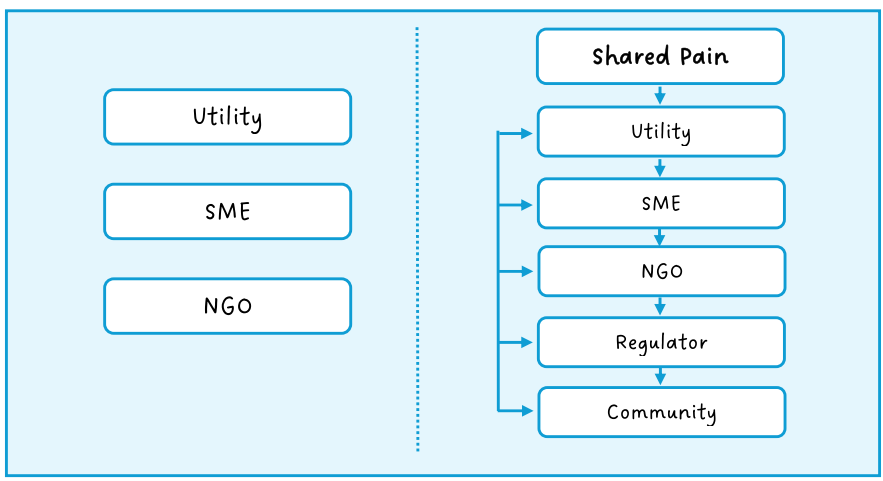


Figure 8 From silos to shared pain.
Collaboration begins not by aligning interests, but by surfacing a shared pain no single sector can solve alone.

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THE HIDDEN TRUTH ABOUT COLLABORATION IN WATER

Power asymmetry sits at the heart of most failed collaborations. Utilities control assets. Regulators control permission. Investors control capital. NGOs control legitimacy. When power is left implicit, it leaks into every decision. The leader's task is not to erase power, which is impossible, but to surface it early and design rules that prevent it from dominating the collaboration.

Successful cross-sector partnerships are rare, but when they work, they change everything. Studies, including those supported by the World Bank, OECD and others, show that multi-stakeholder water projects are significantly more likely to achieve sustainable outcomes than single-sector ones. Yet private sector and civil society involvement remains limited in most water initiatives.

The barriers are real: mismatched timelines (startups move in months, utilities in decades), conflicting incentives (profit *vs* public service), and deep mistrust born of past failures.

But the landscape is shifting. Digital tools now make real-time data sharing possible; impact investing demands systemic solutions; younger professionals refuse to work in silos; and citizens, especially women and youth, are demanding a seat at the table.

The future belongs to leaders who can turn competitors into co-creators.

THE FOUR PHASES OF BUILDING UNBREAKABLE CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS

Cross-sector collaboration is where mindset is tested, funding is contested, and vision is either diluted or multiplied.

Phase 1 – Start with Shared Stakes, Not Shared Goals

Mindset link: Emotional Intelligence + Advocate

People do not collaborate because of abstract alignment. They collaborate because they hurt in the same place.

Practice: Begin every partnership process with a '*pain mapping*' workshop. Ask each stakeholder: '*What keeps you awake at night about water*?' Do not rush to solutions. Let the raw stories surface.

In one partnership we almost lost a major utility until their director admitted, in a small circle, that leaks were costing him his reputation with the mayor. That moment of vulnerability opened the door to everything else.

Ask yourself: ***What shared pain can I surface before I ask for anyone's commitment***?

Phase 2 – Design Governance That Rewards Contribution, Not Control

Mindset link: Ethics + Connector

Most collaborations fail because someone tries to own them.

Practice: Create decision-making rules that feel fair from day one. Give smaller organisations equal votes on strategic direction. Rotate leadership roles. Build 'contribution budgets – explicit recognition (and sometimes funding) for the time SMEs and NGOs invest in co-design.

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One consortium I led was on the verge of collapse because the large utility wanted final say on everything. We introduced a simple rule: technical decisions by consensus among operators, impact and budget decisions shared. Trust returned overnight.

Phase 3 – Co-Create the First Small Win Together

Mindset link: Resilience + Mentor

Big visions inspire, but small wins bind.

Practice: Identify a quick, visible deliverable that requires every sector's input. This could be a joint policy brief, a shared data dashboard, a community pilot. Celebrate it loudly and publicly, crediting everyone by name.

In one partnership, our first major achievement was a co-authored open letter urging regional regulators to require gender-disaggregated leakage data. It was published in English, translated into 23 languages, endorsed by more than 40 organisations, and influential enough to shift regulatory guidance within a year. That letter became a stabilising force for the partnership, keeping us aligned and resilient when later challenges emerged.

Phase 4 – Institutionalise the Collaboration So It Outlives the Project

Mindset link: Visionary Thinking + Mentor

Most partnerships fade as soon as the funding runs out.

Practice: Plan for legacy from day one. Build open-source tools, co-develop training programmes, or create a permanent multi-stakeholder platform. Invest in young professionals as '*collaboration champions*' who can carry the relationships forward.

One of the partnerships I helped establish between my organisation and an NGO is a good example. It has since grown into an award-winning start-up. Long after the original funding ended, it continues to pioneer innovative approaches for cleaning contaminated marine sediments and municipal wastewater, while delivering capacity-building programmes and convening diverse stakeholders together; still launching new initiatives 20 years on.

Mature collaboration leadership also means knowing when to stop. If a partnership undermines equity, silences dissent, or exploits smaller actors, institutionalising it will only amplify the harm. Stepping away can be an act of leadership, and often the beginning of a healthier collaboration elsewhere.

PERSONAL REFLECTION – THE PARTNERSHIP THAT ALMOST NEVER BEGAN

It was about 20 years ago. I had spent six months trying to build a consortium to transform wastewater treatment plants into biorefineries, drawing on my experience in bioremediation, resource recovery, and international partnerships. But doing this from a new organisation, in a new country, without established internal backing, made the task feel almost impossible.

I spent days in meetings with internal leaders and external stakeholders. At times, the encouragement I received from outside my organisation felt stronger

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than the support I had inside. Over the course of a single week, I presented the concept to more than 10 national players, including a major water utility. Some conversations stretched for hours as I explained what the project could unlock for each of them. One by one, they came on board. I secured letters of support from all of them, and the utility even committed significant additional funding and staff time if I won the public funds. For the first time, I could see a path forward.

My line manager reviewed the proposal over a weekend, the signatures were gathered just in time, and then all I could do was wait. When the decision came back, it wasn't funded. I was devastated.

But something unexpected happened. Those conversations, the long, honest, sometimes exhausting ones, had built real momentum. Even without public funding, the private partners, including the large utility, decided to back my idea anyway.

And that experience taught me the deepest truth about collaboration: it rarely begins with agreement or certainty. It begins with open conversations, with listening, and with people feeling seen.

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EXERCISE: YOUR CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION CANVAS

Quick diagnostic:

- If meetings feel polite but nothing moves, you have alignment without ownership.
- If meetings feel tense but productive, you are probably collaborating.

Use this to design or diagnose your next partnership.

Question	My Answer Today
The shared pain that no single sector can solve alone	
Three 'unlikely' partners I will invite first	1. 2. 3.
The governance rule that will feel fair to the smallest player	
The first small win we can co-create in 100 days	
The legacy structure we build from day one	

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Water challenges are systemic; leadership must be relational.
- Collaboration succeeds when pain, power, and purpose are surfaced early.
- Fair governance matters more than perfect goodwill.
- Small, shared wins build trust faster than grand visions.
- The strongest collaborations are designed to endure or exited with integrity.

A WATER COLLABORATOR'S MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it before your next difficult stakeholder meeting.*)

I will no longer accept silos as inevitable.
I will become the kind of leader who turns competitors into co-creators, suspicion into shared pain, and separate agendas into unstoppable momentum.
Because the resilient, equitable water future we need will never be built by one sector alone.

Your move.
Reach out to the partner who scares you most.
Today.

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Chapter 6

Driving digital transformation in water

THE DAY THE DATA SAVED A CITY

It was 3 a.m. in a control room in a mid-sized European utility. Alarms were flashing. Overnight, water losses had surged to nearly 40%. The manager on duty stared at the SCADA screens: pressure drops, erratic flows, and the unmistakable signs of a major burst somewhere in the oldest part of the network.

Normally this would have triggered days of leak-hunting; crews digging through streets, millions of litres lost, customers waking up to dry taps. Instead, the manager opened a decision-support dashboard developed by a small local startup the utility had hesitantly partnered with two years earlier.

A single red circle appeared on the map, pinpointing a 300-metre pipe segment in a light-industrial area. Pressure sensors upstream and downstream had detected the anomaly in real time. Acoustic data confirmed unusual noise. The AI model, trained on utility's own historical patterns, estimated a burst with more than 90% confidence.

By 4:30 a.m. a crew was on site. By 6 a.m. the valve was isolated, the pipe repaired, and only one fraction of the usual water loss had occurred. The city never noticed.

It worked because someone, years earlier, had pushed through scepticism, budget constraints, and cultural resistance to get those systems deployed. The utility saved a six-figure sum that night; and discovered a new way of operating.

Digital transformation is not about gadgets or dashboards.

It is about giving water systems eyes, ears, and a brain, and giving the people who run them the power to act before a crisis becomes tomorrow's news.

Digital did not replace judgement, it amplified it.

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WHY DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IS A LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

Water utilities are among the most conservative organisations in the world. They operate infrastructure designed to last a century, often with assets that predate the internet. Many still depend on paper logs, manual meter reading, and the accumulated intuition of staff who have spent decades on the job.

But the challenges are evolving far faster than the systems built to manage them. Ageing networks in many cities lose 20–50% of treated water. Climate extremes push already stressed infrastructure to its limits. Emerging contaminants demand real-time monitoring that traditional sampling cannot deliver. Customers expect transparency and lower bills. Regulators expect zero spills and net-zero emissions.

Digital tools, including sensors, artificial intelligence (AI), digital twins, predictive analytics, remote telemetry, are no longer optional. They are the only viable way to run ageing systems more intelligently, more affordable, more equitably, and with greater resilience.

Yet digital transformation is not a technology project.

It is a leadership project.

It requires the vision to look beyond familiar spreadsheets, the courage to challenge '*we have done it always this way*', and the skills to bring people along when change feels unsettling.

And none of it works without trust.

Trust in how data is governed, protected, and used. A single cybersecurity breach, an opaque algorithm, or unclear data ownership can undo years of relationship-building in an instant. Digital leaders must treat data ethics and security not as technical add-ons, but as foundations of client and public confidence.

THE HIDDEN TRUTH ABOUT DIGITAL IN WATER

Many utilities have experimented with digital pilots, including smart meters, leak-detection sensors, or predictive maintenance software. Most never scale. A recent international survey showed that digital adoption is advancing, it still stalls in pilot or early-stage deployment for many operators[21].

The barriers are rarely technical. They are human: fear of job loss, doubts about data accuracy, limited digital skills, weak change-management processes, and budgets that still favour concrete and steel over software and insight.

Yet the utilities that break through, from pioneering European cities to global leaders in water-stressed regions, share a common thread: leadership that treats digital not as a cost line, but as a strategic multiplier of resilience, equity, and public trust.

Digital transformation is the moment where funding decisions become operational reality, and where cross-sector collaboration is either strengthened

[21]Daniel I., Ajami N. K., Castelletti A., Savic D., Stewart R. A. and Cominola A. (2023). A survey of water utilities' digital transformation: drivers, impacts, and enabling technologies. *NPJ Clean Water* 6, article number 15. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41545-023-00265-7.

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or exposed. Figure 9 illustrates this shift clearly: digital transformation is not about stacking tools, but about enabling people to make better decisions with confidence (Figure 9).

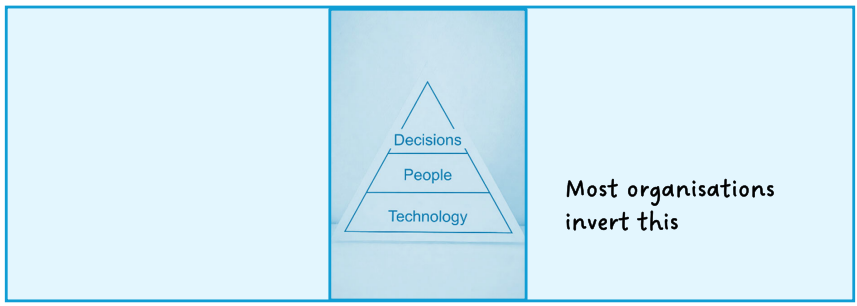


Figure 9 Digital transformation is not a tech stack.
Digital transformation succeeds when technology supports people's decisions, not when tools lead without trust.

THE FOUR PHASES OF DRIVING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Phase 1 – Start with the Pain, Not the Technology

Mindset link: Emotional Intelligence + Advocate

People resist digital when they feel it is being imposed on them. They embrace it when it solves a problem they already live with.

Practice: Begin every digital initiative with a '*pain mapping*' session with operators, not only with IT. Ask: '*What frustrates you most about your daily work*?'

In one utility the answer was simple '*night shifts spent chasing false alarms from aging sensors*.' That pain became the first pilot. An AI model filtered out false positives, and the very operators who had been sceptical became its strongest advocates.

Ask yourself: ***What real pain does this digital tool actually remove for the people who will use it every day***?

And pain mapping must also include the people whose struggles are often invisible, for example, low-income households, informal settlements, and communities with limited digital access. If their needs are not part of the design, digital transformation will deepen the very inequities water leadership is meant to reduce.

Phase 2 – Build Trust Before You Build Systems

Mindset link: Ethics + Connector

Digital efforts collapse when people do not trust the data, the algorithms, or the motives behind them.

Practice: Co-design with users from day one. Share raw data openly. Explain how models are trained, and where they can fail. Bring union representatives into the conversation early.

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Other sectors have already recognised this need. Aviation, health, and finance have adopted 'Digital Ethics Charters', which are formal commitments to transparency, data protection, human oversight, and responsible AI. These charters are not technical documents; they are trust-building tools. The water sector has no equivalent yet, but it could benefit enormously from adapting these models to its own context, especially where digital tools intersect with public service, safety, and equity.

Trust is not a by-product of digital transformation.

It is the foundation.

Phase 3 – Pilot Fast, Learn Faster, Scale Smart

Mindset link: Resilience + Innovator

Big-bang digital rollouts usually fail. The real progress comes from starting small, proving value quickly, and scaling only once the benefits are undeniable.

Practice: Run focused 90-day pilots with clear success metrics, for example, water saved, staff hours reduced, customer complaints down. Celebrate the wins publicly. Learn from the setbacks openly.

One utility began with smart pressure management in a single district, cut leaks by more than 20% in three months, and then expanded the approach across the entire network within a year.

Just as important are the stopping rules: the predefined signals that a pilot should be paused, redesigned, or abandoned if it is not delivering value.

Scaling wisely is as much about knowing when to stop as when to accelerate.

Phase 4 – Make Digital Part of the Culture, Not a Project

Mindset link: Visionary Thinking + Mentor

Digital transformation collapses the moment the consultant leaves or the grant runs out.

Practice: Build digital capability in-house. Train operators to become '*data champions*'. Create cross-functional teams that blend engineering, operations, and IT. Integrate digital KPIs into performance reviews so that new ways of working become part of the culture, not an add-on.

One utility now runs its own internal '*digital academy*' training hundreds of staff and turning technology from a perceived threat into a shared source of pride.

Sustainable digital change is not outsourced. It is grown from within (Figure 10).

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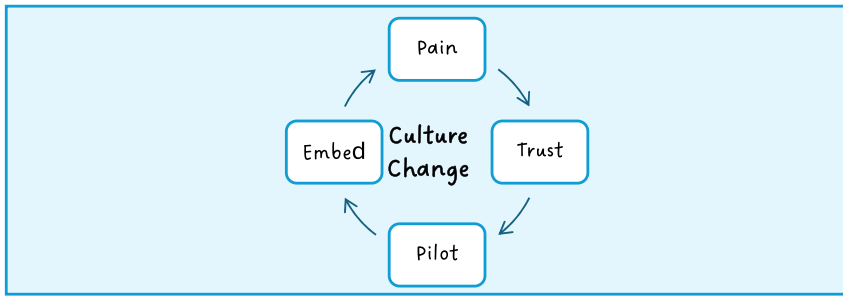


Figure 10 Digital maturity loop.
Lasting digital change follows a continuous loop of addressing real pain, building trust, piloting fast, and embedding into culture.

PERSONAL REFLECTION – THE DIGITAL PILOT THAT ALMOST DIED ON DAY ONE

It was a few years ago. I was in a meeting where a client had finally persuaded a hesitant utility to pilot real-time leak detection sensors in one district. Just before the kick-off meeting, the operations manager pulled us aside and said quietly, '*This is going to make my team redundant. Why should we help you prove that*?'

We did not try to argue with her or prove her wrong. We just listened.

For 20 minutes she talked about night shifts spent chasing false alarms, crews digging up streets for nothing, and the constant pressure from local officials to keep tariffs low. My client did not defend the technology. I asked: '***What would success look like for you and your team***?'

She thought for a moment. '*No more pointless night digs. More sleep. Knowing we are catching real leaks before anyone calls to complain*.'

That afternoon we rewrote the pilot's success criteria: not only litres saved, but a 50% reduction in night-shift call-outs. The operations manager became the project's strongest advocate. The pilot worked. The team got more rest. Leaks dropped by nearly a third. And the utility is now scaling the sensors across the entire network.

That day reinforced something I have seen again and again: digital transformation is never about the technology. It is about making people's working lives better, starting with the people who will live with the change every day.

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EXERCISE: YOUR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION CANVAS

Quick diagnostic:

- If your digital project is led by IT alone, it will fail.
- If it is led by operations alone, it will stall.
- If it is co-led by operators, IT, and leadership, it has a chance.

Use this to plan or assess your next digital initiative.

Question	My Answer Today
The real pain this digital tool will solve for the people who use it	
Three 'unlikely' champions I will involve from day one (operators, union reps, etc.)	1. 2. 3.
The first small, visible win we can deliver in 90 days	
The trust-building step I will take before any technology is installed	
The legacy element we will build so this outlives the pilot	

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Digital transformation succeeds when it starts with human pain, no technological promise.
- Trust in data, intent, and impact matters more than algorithms.
- Pilots scale only when people see their own lives improve.
- Digital tools amplify human judgement; they do not replace it.
- The most resilient utilities treat digital capability as a core leadership function.

A DIGITAL WATER LEADER'S MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it before your next digital meeting.*)

I will no longer treat digital as a cost or a threat.
I will become the kind of leader who turns data into decisions, sensors into sleep, and technology into trust; because the resilient, transparent, equitable water systems we need will never be built with yesterday's tools alone.

Your move.
Identify one pain point today and ask who can help you solve it with digital tomorrow.

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Part 3

Application



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Chapter 7

Case study: resilient utilities for the future

THE UTILITY THAT SHOULD HAVE FAILED

Picture a mid-sized urban utility serving around a million people in a middle-income country.

Its network dated back in the 1970s and 1980s. More than 40% of the pipes were asbestos cement or cast iron, losing 35–45% of treated water before it ever reached a tap. Non-revenue water was not a statistic; it was a daily haemorrhage.

Climate pressures were already reshaping operations: longer dry seasons, more intense storms, and flash floods that routinely overwhelmed combined sewers. The regulator insisted on keeping tariffs low despite rising energy costs and rapid population growth. Public trust was fragile: every burst main or discoloured tap water became another headline. Staff morale was equally brittle; many senior operators were nearing retirement, and younger engineers felt trapped between outdated procedures and impossible expectations.

By most conventional metrics, this utility should have failed. Most mornings, the general manager arrived before dawn, not to plan strategy, but to field calls from politicians, journalists, and exhausted crews.

And yet, it did not fail.

What changed the trajectory was not a sudden influx of capital or a shiny new technology platform. It was a series of deliberate leadership choices, often unpopular, sometimes lonely, that slowly shifted the organisation from an ageing infrastructure operator into a resilient, adaptive leadership system.

THE LEADERSHIP DILEMMA: WHAT HAD TO STOP

The most important question the leadership team faced was not '*What new framework should we adopt*?'

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It was far more uncomfortable: '***What are we doing today that we must stop doing, immediately, if we want to survive the next decade***?'

They had to stop:

- Treating non-revenue water as an inevitable '*loss*' instead of a debt passed on to future generations.
- Waiting for external funding before addressing problems they already had the capacity to fix.
- Allowing technical excellence to compensate for weak communication with customers and communities.
- Managing in silos: operations apart from finance, engineering apart from public engagement.

Letting go of those habits was far harder than starting anything new (Figure 11).



Figure 11 What to stop before what to start.
Utility transformation begins by stopping behaviours that normalise loss, opacity, and siloed leadership.

THREE INFLECTION DECISIONS THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

1. The Technical Inflection: From Reactive Repairs to Proactive Renewal

The first hard choice was to stop treating leaks as an unavoidable fact and start treating every cubic metre lost as an emergency. The utility introduced a simple, non-negotiable rule: any leak detection data, no matter how small, triggered immediate action. No more '*we'll get to it next quarter.*'

They shifted 15% of the annual maintenance budget from routine repairs to proactive pipe replacement and pressure management. Within 18 months, non-revenue water dropped from 42% to 28%. The savings funded the next round of renewals.

What nearly went wrong: middle managers initially resisted because the new rule disrupted long-standing routines and exposed gaps in crew capacity. Leadership had to visibly participate. Senior engineers joined night shifts to demonstrate that this was not just another top-down directive.

This was not a technical upgrade.

It was a leadership decision to prioritise long-term resilience over short-term comfort.

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2. The Political Inflection: From Defensive Communication to Radical Transparency

The second hard choice was to stop treating the public as passive customers and start treating them as co-owners of the system. This demanded real leadership courage: choosing transparency even when it guaranteed criticism.

They launched monthly '*water forums*', which consisted of open meetings where residents could see real-time dashboards of leaks repaired, water quality results, and tariff usage. They published annual '*water balance*' reports in plain language, showing exactly how every unit of revenue was allocated. And when a major burst occurred, the utility manager went on local radio the same day; not to defend, but to explain and apologise.

What nearly went wrong: the first forum was hostile. People shouted about past failures. Leadership had to resist the instinct to cancel future meetings and instead doubled down, inviting the loudest critics to join a citizen advisory group. That group later became one of the strongest advocates for tariff adjustments needed to fund long-term resilience.

3. The Cultural Inflection: From Hierarchy to Shared Ownership

The third, and hardest decision was to stop treating frontline operators as '*implementers*' and start treating them as co-designers of the future.

They created '*innovation teams*' made up of operators, engineers, customer-service staff, and young apprentices, each tasked with solving one real pain point per quarter. The rule was simple: no idea was too small or too unconventional. Teams that delivered workable solutions received a small budget to prototype them and public recognition at staff meetings.

What nearly went wrong: senior managers initially saw the approach as a loss of control. Some tried to veto ideas outright. Leadership intervened by making the teams report directly to the board, bypassing the usual hierarchy, for the first year. That single symbolic shift changed the culture more than any training programme could have.

Culture did not change because people were taught differently.

It changed because leadership redistributed power, visibly, deliberately, and in ways people could feel.

TRANSFERABLE LESSONS FROM GLOBAL PROJECTS

This imaginary utility is not exceptional because of its context. It is exceptional because of the choices its leaders made; choices I have seen replicated, with local variation, in utilities across the world. From fast-growing cities in Asia to relentless rain floods in central America.

The common thread is simple: resilient utilities are not built by frameworks alone.

They are built by leaders willing to stop doing what feels comfortable and start doing what is necessary.

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Three lessons stand out:

(1) **Stop accepting losses as normal.** Every cubic metre of water lost is a debt to future generations; treat it with the urgency it deserves.
(2) **Stop hiding behind technical complexity.** Transparency and public engagement are not optional extras; they are the foundations of legitimacy and support.
(3) **Stop leading from the top.** The most resilient systems are those where frontline staff feel ownership; because they helped design the change.

Every decision described here, what to stop, what to prioritise, who to trust, became part of the story of this imagined utility long before anyone would have called it a legacy.

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EXERCISE: APPLY THREE LEADERSHIP LESSONS TO A LOCAL UTILITY

Choose one utility you know well (even if you have no formal authority within it), your employer, a partner, or one in your community.

1	**Identify one 'accepted loss'** (e.g., high non-revenue water, poor customer communication, outdated skills). What is it?
2	**Name one behaviour the leadership must stop** to address it.
3	**Define one small, visible action** you can take in the next 90 days to start the shift (even if you are not the CEO). Action: By when:

Keep this page. Revisit it in three months.
Ask yourself: ***Did I act***? ***Did anything change***?

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Resilient utilities are shaped more by leadership choices than by infrastructure age.
- Transformation begins by stopping what no longer serves the future.
- Transparency and shared ownership convert distrust into legitimacy.
- Even without formal authority, leaders can trigger meaningful change.

A RESILIENT UTILITY LEADER'S MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it when the next crisis feels too big.*)

I will no longer accept losses as inevitable.
I will no longer hide behind technical complexity.
I will no longer lead from the top alone.
I will become the kind of leader who stops what must stop, starts what must start, and invites everyone to own the future; because the utility I lead today is the legacy the next generation will inherit tomorrow.

Your move.
Identify one '*accepted loss*' in your utility right now and decide what you will stop doing about it this week.

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Chapter 8

Case study: circular economy in action

THE DAY THE REGULATORS SAID NO – AND WE KEPT GOING

It was a grey afternoon in Brussels about a decade ago. I sat across from a senior European regulator who had just finished reading the first concept note for what would later become a major circular water project. The proposal was ambitious: recover clean water, bioenergy, and high-value bioproducts from municipal and agro-industrial wastewater using low-energy, nature-based systems. The vision was simple and radical: turn waste into resources across several demonstration sites.

The regulator closed the document and said, '*Under current regulation, this won't be permitted. Reuse for irrigation or aquaculture is not allowed*'.

The room fell quiet. Partners exchanged uneasy looks.

I took a breath and replied, '*Then we'll need to work together to address the regulatory barriers*.'

That quiet sentence became the unofficial motto of the next four years. At the time, I was coordinating the work of my organisation in the consortium; responsible not only for delivery, but for holding together a diverse group of utilities, SMEs, researchers and colleagues whose own internal rules were being challenged by the project's ambition.

We did not stop. We did not switch to something easier. We kept going.

A few months into the project, we were challenged again, this time by a global-markets expert questioning our commercial positioning, competitive landscape, and exploitation routes. *How were we going to compete with established market leaders*? Fortunately, we had already begun defining the unique value proposition of the new products. Instead of being defensive, we acknowledged the gaps, worked closely with the independent experts, and use their input to refine our commercial strategy.

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The project went on to win one of Europe's most respected water innovation awards, demonstrate resource recovery at full-scale, influence regulatory conservations at national and EU levels, and show that circular water systems are not a distant aspiration. They are a leadership choice made in the face of resistance.

Circular economy in water is not a technology showcase.

It is a leadership test, especially when the rules are still being written.

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE: WHEN INNOVATION THREATENS THE STATUS QUO

Circular economy sounds elegant on paper: close loops, recover nutrients, generate energy, reduce waste. In practice it is profoundly disruptive.

It threatens existing power structures:

- Utilities lose the comfort of '*treat and discharge*.'
- Regulators lose the certainty of rigid standards.
- Farmers and industry lose the excuse of '*we have always done it this way*.'
- Investors lose the predictability of linear business models.

Every step forward means someone has to give something up: control, certainty, income, or simply the comfort of doing things the way they have always been done.

The real leadership question in circular economy is never '*Can we recover resources*?'

It is: '***Who has to lose power or comfort for this to succeed?*** and ***am I willing to lead that conversation***?'

Figure 12 shows exactly what is at stake: moving from linear habits to circular systems requires leaders willing to challenge the status quo (Figure 12).

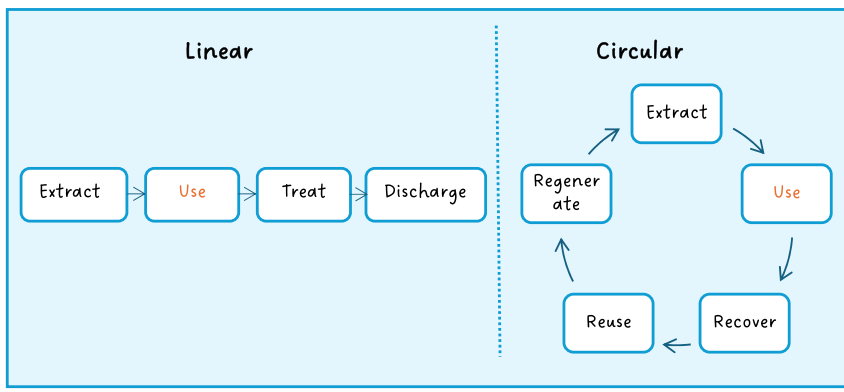


Figure 12 From linear to circular water systems.
Circular water systems replace extract–use–treat–dispose thinking with recovery, reuse, and regeneration.

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THREE LEADERSHIP MOVES THAT MADE CIRCULAR POSSIBLE

1. The Regulatory Move: From Compliance to Co-Creation

We did not accept '*it's not allowed*' as final.

Instead, we invited regulators and policy makers into the design process from month three. We created a Regulatory Advisory Board, not as window-dressing, but as genuine co-design partners. We shared early data, hosted field visits to pilot sites, and asked: '*What evidence would you need to feel safe approving this reuse pathway*?'

What nearly went wrong: some regulators and policy makers felt threatened by the pace. We had to slow down deliberately, organise extra workshops, and to translate technical reports into plain language to rebuild trust. That investment paid off: by the end of the project, two demonstration sites received temporary permits for reuse within the utility's premises, and the findings fed directly into updates of EU wastewater reuse guidelines.

2. The Financial Move: From Grant Dependency to Value Creation

Circular systems cost more upfront. We knew the multi-million initial investment would never be enough to scale.

We shifted the conversation early: from '*How much money do we need*?' to '*What value can we create that someone else will pay for*?' We modelled nutrient recovery as fertiliser replacement, bioenergy as grid balancing, reclaimed water as drought insurance. We brought impact investors and water companies into the consortium from year one.

What nearly went wrong: one SME nearly withdrew when their cash flow dried up mid-project. Leadership stepped in with bridge financing and accelerated the first commercial offtake agreement. That small intervention kept the partnership intact and demonstrated the strength of the business case.

3. The Relational Move: From Competition to Shared Ownership

Circular economy requires trust across value chains that have historically been rivals.

We made relational moves deliberate, rotating leadership of work packages, co-authoring reports with every partner named, celebrating failures publicly so no one felt alone. When one site struggled with algae harvesting, the Danish team flew to Spain to help troubleshoot; not as consultants, but as peers.

What nearly went wrong: early ego clashes between academic and industry partners. We introduced '*appreciation rounds*' at every consortium meeting, consisting of two minutes where each partner publicly thanked another. That small ritual reduced friction more than any contract clause.

THE SCALING MOMENT: WHEN FAILURE AND SUCCESS LOOKED IDENTICAL

In year three, at the Greek demonstration site, the constructed wetland system failed to meet expected nutrient removal rates during a heatwave. The data looked bad. The regulator threatened to revoke the temporary permit. The SME

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responsible for the technology faced reputational damage. The leadership team of this project knew that whatever we chose next would define not just the project's credibility, but our own.

We could have scaled back, blamed weather, declared partial success.

Instead, the partnership made a collective choice: keep the site running, publish the failure openly, and use it to refine the model. We invited the regulator to co-author the lessons-learned report. That transparency turned a near-collapse into credibility. The regulator became an advocate. The refined technology was later adopted in two other countries.

That moment taught me that scaling circular systems is not about avoiding failure.

It is about failing publicly, together, and turning the failure into shared knowledge.

WHAT THIS TEACHES ABOUT INNOVATION LEADERSHIP

For young professionals especially, circular economy work happens in uncertainty. Rules are incomplete. Data is imperfect. Stakeholders disagree.

If you are early in your career, this kind of leadership may feel out of reach. It is not. In uncertain systems, influence comes less from hierarchy than from who is willing to step forward when the rules are unclear.

Three lessons stand out:

(1) **Stop waiting for permission**. Regulatory change rarely starts at the top. It starts when someone demonstrates what is possible and safe.
(2) **Stop treating partners as vendors**. Shared ownership, emotional and financial, is the only way to survive the inevitable setbacks.
(3) **Stop fearing failure**. The most important innovation is not the technology that works perfectly on day one. It is the system that learns fast when it fails.

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EXERCISE: YOUR CIRCULAR ECONOMY LEADERSHIP PLANNER

Choose one water-related waste stream in your organisation or community (e.g., wastewater nutrients, organic sludge, non-revenue water).

1	**Identify the current linear loss** What resource is being wasted today?
2	**Name the biggest barrier** (regulatory, financial, relational)
3	**Define one small experiment** you can lead or propose in the next 90 days Action: By when:
4	**Who is one 'unlikely ally'** you will invite to co-design it? Name/role:

Keep this planner visible. Revisit it quarterly.
Ask: ***Did we learn***? ***Did we scale***? ***Did we build trust***?

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Circular economy is not a technology; it is leadership in the absence of full agreement on the rules.
- The hardest work is not inventing solutions; it is giving up control, certainty, and comfort.
- Transparency about failure builds more trust than perfect success.
- Every circular step you take today is a gift to the generation that will inherit the system tomorrow.

A CIRCULAR WATER LEADER'S MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it when someone says, 'it's not allowed'.)*

I will no longer wait for perfect rules or unanimous agreement. I will become the kind of leader who demonstrates what is possible, shares the failures openly, and builds trust across old boundaries. Because the circular, regenerative water future we need will never arrive by following yesterday's rules.

Your move.
Identify one linear loss in your world today and decide who you will invite to turn it into a loop.

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Chapter 9

Case study: women leading water change

THE MEETING WHERE NO ONE ASKED THE QUESTION THAT MATTERED MOST

It was at a technical steering committee meeting more than a decade ago for a large basin project in a low-income country. The room had 14 people: engineers, hydrologists, utility directors, donors. The majority men. The agenda was packed: hydrological modelling, nutrient load reduction targets, investment prioritisation.

At the time, I was leading and advising multiple international water programmes, often working across technical, regulatory, and stakeholder boundaries; and often as the only woman in senior technical rooms.

Halfway through, one of the younger engineers, the only other woman in the room, raised her hand.

> '*Before we lock in these infrastructure options,' she said quietly, 'can we talk about who actually collects and uses the water in the rural areas we're targeting? Because in most of these communities, that person is a woman or a girl. And none of our current designs account for the time, safety, or physical burden they carry.*'

Silence.

Then one senior director cleared his throat. '*That's more of a social issue*,' he said. '*We're here for the engineering.*'

The meeting moved on. But something shifted in me that day. I realised the sector was losing critical intelligence, not because women lacked competence, but because the system had not been built to include their knowledge, their lived experience, or their questions.

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When women are systematically excluded from water decision-making, the sector does not just miss half the talent.

It misses critical parts of reality and makes weaker decisions as a result.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE CONFIRMS

This is not only my experience.

The findings presented in '***Women in Water: How to Support Everyone's Contribution***'[22] reinforce a pattern that appears across regions and roles: women in the water sector are underrepresented, often underestimated, and systematically excluded from opportunities to contribute fully.

The study highlights how expectations about women's roles continue to shape access to leadership, fieldwork, and decision-making spaces. In many cases, women are denied opportunities not because of lack of competence, but because of assumptions about what they can or should do. This limits not only individual careers, but the sector's ability to draw on the full range of available talent and insight.

It also shows how exclusion operates in subtle ways: fewer speaking opportunities, less visibility in technical forums, and reduced access to informal networks where influence is built. Over time, these patterns compound, not just into inequality, but into weaker systems.

The conclusion is clear: when women are not fully included, the sector is not operating at its full capacity.

And when they are included, the system becomes more adaptive, more aware, and more effective.

In other words, inclusion is not about adding voices at the margins.

It is about improving how the system thinks and decides.

WHAT THE SECTOR LOSES WHEN WOMEN ARE EXCLUDED – AND GAINS WHEN THEY LEAD

Water leadership has long suffered from a structural blind spot: most decision-making tables in water were historically designed by and for men, and many still reflect that legacy today.

The consequences are measurable:

- Infrastructure that ignores the daily realities of water collection (long walks, safety risks, physical load) leads to lower adoption and higher failure rates.
- Tariff models that do not consider household-level decision-making (often led by women) create equity gaps and payment resistance.
- Innovation pipelines that overlook gender-disaggregated data produce solutions that widen rather than close access divides.

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[22]Davis C., De Cock A., Ibrahimllari A., Odud L. and Radilova, S. (2024). *Women in Water: How to Support Everyone's Contribution*. IWA Publishing. doi: 10.2166/9781789064070.

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When women lead, or when men actively create space for women to lead, the outcomes change dramatically:

- Higher project sustainability, with gender-inclusive water and sanitation initiatives consistently showing stronger long-term performance across multiple global studies.
- Better risk identification, as women often surface social, cultural and operational barriers early in the design process.
- Stronger community ownership, with projects shaped by women's input showing higher levels of acceptance, use, and maintenance.
- More grounded and inclusive decision-making processes that reflect how water is actually accessed, used, and managed in daily life.

This is not a '*women's issue*.'
It is a systems leadership issue.
A sector that excludes any group's knowledge is a sector that is deliberately choosing to be less intelligent (Figure 13). At a time when water challenges are becoming more complex, that is a risk we can no longer afford.

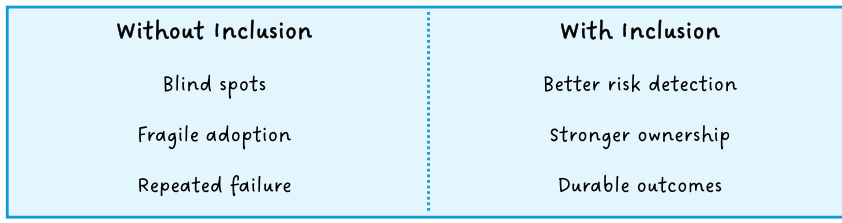


Figure 13 What inclusion actually changes.
Inclusive leadership improves decision quality by revealing risks, realities, and solutions the system would otherwise miss.

If exclusion is systemic, inclusion must be deliberate.
The question is no longer whether inclusion matters.
It is what leaders are willing to do differently to make it real.

THREE LEADERSHIP INTERVENTIONS THAT MAKE INCLUSION REAL

1. Mentorship That Goes Both Ways

Inclusion is not charity; it is mutual learning.

I have mentored dozens of young women in the sector, and they have mentored me back. They have helped me recognise patterns I had learned to overlook who speaks first, who is interrupted, whose ideas are picked up, and whose are left behind. They taught me how to reframe technical arguments in ways that reach non-technical stakeholders, and how to build conscience without conforming to inherited norms of leadership.

In many meetings, especially those still shaped by what can feel like an '*old boy's club*', the dynamics follow a familiar script. Conversations begin with informal exchanges, jokes, and anecdotes that establish comfort, but not for

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everyone. When the formal agenda starts, women are often called later in the discussion, sometimes with a gentle but telling prompt: '*please be brief, we need to move on*'.

Individually, these moments may seem minor. Repeated over time, they send a clear signal: your contribution is secondary. Presence becomes symbolic rather than influential. When this pattern persists, motivation erodes; not because capability is lacking, but because it is not fully recognised.

Mentorship, especially when it goes both ways, is what makes these patterns visible. It creates the space to name them early, challenge them constructively, and change them before they become embedded in culture.

In practice, this has very tangible effects: when these behaviours are recognised and addressed, early-career women are more likely to stay, to contribute with confidence, and to be seen for the value they bring. Over time, this translates into stronger visibility, more equitable opportunities, and faster and more equitable progression into leadership roles

Practice: Set up reverse-mentoring pairs. Senior leaders learn to recognise blind spots and everyday biases; junior professionals gain sponsorship, visibility, and access to decision-making spaces. Both sides grow, and the system becomes more aware of itself.

2. Policy Changes That Shift Power, Not Just Representation

Quotas help, but they are not enough. Real change comes from redesigning how decisions are made, and who gets to shape them.

One of the most overlooked, and powerful, places to do this is in recruitment.

Over the years, I have seen how intentional changes in recruitment processes can shift not just representation, but influence. Increasingly, more women are included in interview panels, contributing not only to shortlisting and interviews, but also to discussions on salary, candidate ranking, final selection, and even how candidates are introduced to the wider team.

But inclusion at this level needs to go further to truly shift power.

In my own practice, I have consistently pushed for recruitment panels that are not only gender-diverse, but also reflect diversity in age, experience, and, where relevant, geography. Junior and mid-career colleagues bring perspectives that are often closer to the realities of day-to-day operations and team dynamics, particularly when recruiting for senior roles. Their input helps test not only competence, but leadership style, credibility, and the ability to work across levels. Equally, when organisations aim to expand into new regions, involving professionals from those contexts is essential. They bring an understanding of local needs, cultural dynamics, and indigenous knowledge that no external expertise can fully replicate.

What nearly goes unnoticed is this: recruitment is not just about selecting candidates. It defines what leadership looks like, and who gets to decide it.

When panels are diverse in a meaningful way, decisions improve. Biases are challenged earlier, and different criteria are surfaced. And the outcome is not only fairer, it is stronger.

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Practice: Review your organisation's recruitment processes. Ask: Who is involved in defining the role, selecting candidates, and making the final decision? Whose perspective is missing, and what would change if they were included earlier?

3. Network-Building That Crosses Traditional Boundaries

Women in water often lack access to the informal networks where opportunities are shaped, influence is built, and leadership pathways are quietly decided.

Networks can be formal or informal. Formal networks are often visible and easier to access, and include professional associations, working groups, sector initiatives. But identifying which of these will create meaningful opportunities, aligned with your interests and values, is far less straightforward.

Early in my career, I joined several formal networks and committed to contributing actively to all of them. Much of that work was unpaid: reviewing scientific papers, supporting technical workshops, contributing to grant proposals. It was intellectually rewarding and gave me visibility. But over time, a pattern emerged.

When it came to stepping into leadership roles within those same networks, not just contributing, but shaping direction, opportunities became limited. Progress was slower, less transparent, and often influenced by informal sponsorship structures that were not always visible or accessible.

Contribution alone does not guarantee progression.

That was the moment I began to understand the importance of informal networks.

These are the relationships that exist beyond formal structures, built through trust, shared purpose, and consistent engagement. They vary across cultures, and for those of us who have worked across countries and contexts, they can be difficult to read at first. But once you begin to recognise the patterns, their influence becomes clear.

In practice, I learned to focus less on the network itself, and more on the people who make it work; those who are genuinely committed to improving how we address global water challenges, and who understand the value of diversity, inclusion, and equity not as principles, but as practice.

The shift is subtle but important: networks do not create opportunity. People do.

Practice: Be intentional about where you invest your time. Identify not only the networks you join, but the relationships you build within them. Seek out those who challenge the system constructively and be one of them. Invite others in. The goal is not to fit into existing networks, but to help reshape them.

ONE INCLUSION EFFORT THAT FAILED – AND WHAT IT TAUGHT

We once launched a 'Women in Water Leadership' fellowship with scholarships, training, and mentorship. The intention was good. The execution faltered.

Participation was low. Many eligible women declined because the programme required weekend travel, which was impossible for many with childcare

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responsibilities. Others questioned its value: '*We don't need another training; we need decision-making power.*'

What we learned was simple, and uncomfortable: inclusion efforts fail when they add burdens instead of removing them.

To be inclusive, we must start by understanding the lived realities of those who have always done the work but have rarely been included in leadership or decision-making. What does it mean to design a programme for women who may be walking kilometres to collect water before the day begins? For those managing households, caring for children on unpredictable schedules, or navigating life stages, such as menopause, that are rarely acknowledged in professional environments, yet directly affect energy, confidence, and participation?

When these realities are ignored, inclusion becomes an additional demand, something to fit in, rather than something that makes participation possible.

Inclusion programmes that are co-created with those they aim to support are fundamentally different. They respond to real constraints, not assumed ones. They shift from '*inviting participation*' to '*making participation possible.*'

We redesigned the programme accordingly: virtual-first, with childcare support, flexible engagement, and, most importantly, direct pathways into existing decision-making spaces rather than parallel structures. The second iteration tripled participation and placed fellows into roles where they could influence real decisions.

This experience also revealed another risk: treating inclusion as separation. Creating spaces only for women can be valuable, but if not carefully designed, it can unintentionally reinforce division rather than shift the system. I have seen initiatives where resources were concentrated in women-only programmes, only to later realise that diversity, in its fullest sense, was still missing.

Inclusion is not about replacing one imbalance with another.

It is about redesigning the system so that diversity is embedded, not isolated.

Failure is not the opposite of inclusion.

Failure to learn from exclusion is.

WHAT THIS TEACHES ABOUT INNOVATION LEADERSHIP

For young and mid-career professionals, especially those from underrepresented groups, the water sector can still feel like a system not built for you.

That feeling is real.

And it is not always easy to move beyond it.

The first response is often frustration, or anger, or a sense of being overlooked or undervalued. Those reactions are human. But staying there can limit what you do next.

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What requires leadership, and a level of personal maturity that is not always acknowledged, is the ability to move through the discomfort and turn it into insight. Not everyone manages that shift. But when it happens, it changes everything.

Because when you are not fully included, you see what others overlook.

You notice who is missing, what is assumed, and where decisions disconnect from reality.

You see the blind spots others have learned to ignore.

You ask the questions others have stopped asking.

You bring perspectives that make solutions more robust, more equitable, and more durable.

But insight alone is not enough.

Leadership begins when you decide what to do with it.

Three reminders:

(1) **You do not need permission to name what is missing.**
The question that feels '*out of scope*' is often the one that reveals the real risk, or the real opportunity.

(2) **Allies are essential, and they are chosen; not assumed or assigned.**
Look for those who listen, who amplify, and who are willing to share power, not just space. And when you find them, build with them. Influence, like leadership, goes both ways.

It is also important to be clear about something that is often left unsaid:

Support does not follow simple lines of identity. Not all women will be your allies, and not all men will be barriers. Many women have been supported, sponsored, and challenged constructively by men who are committed to change. Equally, there are moments when competition, bias, or insecurity can come from within groups we expect to feel aligned with.

Inclusion, therefore, is not about choosing sides. It is about recognising who is willing to build, who listens, and who acts with integrity, and working with them. Effective leaders learn to identify and collaborate with those people, regardless of gender or background.

(3) **Your difference is not something to minimise, it is something to use.**
The sector does not need more people who fit the existing mould.
It needs leaders who can see beyond it and reshape it.

This is not separate from leadership.
It is leadership in its most complete form:
not only solving technical problems,
but ensuring the right problems are being solved,
with the right people in the room.

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EXERCISE: BUILD YOUR INCLUSIVE NETWORK MAP

Take 20 minutes today. Draw or list your current professional network.

1	**Who is already in your circle?** (name/role) Men: Women: Underrepresented groups:
2	**Who is missing?** (the voices not yet at your table) Young professionals: Women from rural/indigenous communities: Non-technical stakeholders (e.g., community leaders): Others:
3	**One outreach action in the next 30 days** Who will you contact? How (coffee, message, invitation to collaborate)? By when:

Keep this map. Update it quarterly.
Ask: Is my network getting more inclusive, and therefore more intelligent?

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When women and underrepresented groups are excluded, the sector loses essential intelligence.
- Inclusion is not a side project; it is a systems upgrade.
- Real change happens through mentorship, redesigned decision rights, and intentional networks.
- The most powerful leaders are those who make space for voices the system was not built to hear.

Every decision about who speaks, who decides, and who is missing is a legacy decision, shaping not only today's project, but who will lead the sector tomorrow.

AN INCLUSIVE WATER LEADER'S MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it before your next meeting where the table looks too familiar.*)

I will no longer assume the room has all the answers it needs. I will become the kind of leader who notices who is missing, invites them in, listens first, shares power, and pays attention to who speaks and who is interrupted; because the resilient, equitable water future we need cannot be built by the same voices that built the problems.

Your move.
Look at your next meeting invite list.

Who is not there, and how will you change that?

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Part 4

Future Vision



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Chapter 10

Your legacy as a water leader

THE DAY I STOPPED WAITING FOR SOMEDAY

It was late 2010. I was sitting in my small office after yet another long meeting on the national water strategy and our positioning. The corridor outside was quiet; most people had already left for the weekend. On the table in front of me lay a draft strategy document for our team. It was good, technically sound, politically careful, full of the right language.

But it felt safe.

Too safe to matter.

I remember looking at the clock: 19:47. My train home was in three hours. I could sign off on the document as it was, go to the train station, and tell myself I had contributed something useful. Or I could stay another hour and rewrite the ambition section into something that actually meant something: a commitment to engage more than 500 diverse actors (e.g., utilities, SMEs, NGOs, youth groups, women-led organisations, indigenous knowledge holders) by 2015, positioning us as leaders at both national and European level.

I stayed.

That one extra hour changed the trajectory of several projects I would work on over the next decade. It was not the biggest decision I ever made. It was not even the most visible. But it was the moment I stopped waiting for '*someday leadership*', for a bigger title, a safer political climate, a clearer mandate, and started acting like the legacy I wanted already depended on what I did that night.

Most legacies begin this way; not with visibility, but with a quiet choice no one else sees.

Legacy is not something you leave behind at retirement.

It is something you build, or fail to build, every single day.

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THE DANGER OF 'SOMEDAY LEADERSHIP'

Most of us carry a quiet, dangerous assumption: '*When I have more authority / more resources / more experience / less risk, then I will lead the way I really want to*.'

We call it prudence. We call it realism.

It is delay, made to sound responsible.

Water does not wait for perfect conditions. Floods do not pause for better budgets. Droughts do not negotiate with political cycles. Emerging contaminants do not care whether your organisation has finished its digital transformation roadmap.

The future arrives whether we are ready or not.

The only question is whether we will have shaped it or merely survived it.

And in water, survival is never neutral; it always means someone else carries the cost.

Everything you have explored in this book (e.g., mindset, courage in crisis, securing funding, building collaboration, and leading digital change), only matters if it compounds over time. Legacy is what happens when leadership choices outlive the moment they were made.

THREE LEGACY HORIZONS EVERY WATER LEADER SHOULD DEFINE TODAY

Legacy is not vague aspiration. It is deliberate choice across three concrete time horizons.

1. The 90-Day Horizon – What will I start this quarter that proves I mean it?

This is the horizon of momentum. Small, visible actions that signal intent and build credibility fast.

Examples:

- Schedule the uncomfortable conversation with the colleague who blocks collaboration. If you feel resistance, note it. Resistance is often the first signal that the action matters.
- Launch a 90-day pilot that tests one bold idea, even if it is small.
- Write and publish one public piece that names an injustice the sector usually avoids.

2. The 5-Year Horizon – What will still be working because you choose to invest in it now?

This is the horizon of scale and systems. *What new capability, relationship, or policy will exist in five years because you chose to invest in it today*?

Examples:

- A cross-sector platform with 100+ active members that did not exist before.
- A new generation of 20–30 young professionals you have mentored who are now leading utilities or policy units.
- A regulatory change or funding mechanism you helped design that is now supporting equitable water access in your region.

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3. The 25-Year Horizon – What will children born today inherit from my work?

This is the horizon of watersheds and generations. *What resilient, equitable system will exist in 2050 because you refused to accept the status quo today*? Examples:

- A catchment where nature-based solutions have restored ecological health and reduced flood risk for decades.
- A utility culture where digital tools serve equity instead of widening gaps.
- A policy framework that treats water as a shared human right, not a commodity to be optimised for profit.

WHAT NOT TO WAIT FOR

Do not wait for:

- **Permission.** Most real change happens before someone officially approves it.
- **Seniority.** Transformative ideas often come from people '*too junior*' to know they are not supposed to speak.
- **Perfect clarity.** Waiting for certainty is the same as waiting forever. Start messy. Learn fast. Adjust constantly.
- **Control.** Legacy is built when systems grow stronger without you at the centre.
- **Recognition.** The most important shifts your trigger may not be attributed to you.

PERSONAL REFLECTION – THE CHOICE THAT STILL ECHOES

About a decade ago I was asked to join an advisory group shaping part of what would become the EU's Water Resilience Strategy. I was not the most senior person in the room. New in that network. But I had one thing: a stubborn belief that water policy could, and must, be shaped by voices that were usually excluded.

I spent months quietly building relationships with underrepresented stakeholders, including women-led organisations, other marginalised groups, and start-ups. I brought their testimonies into meetings where they were rarely heard. I pushed for language that recognised water as a human right first, and only then an economic resource.

Some colleagues rolled their eyes.

Others quietly thanked me later.

Today that strategy, and several others I helped influence, contains commitments to inclusive governance, gender equity, and youth participation that would not have been there without those early, often uncomfortable conversations.

I did not wait for a bigger title.

I did not wait for unanimous approval.

I did not let being one of the underrepresented voices in the room become a reason to stay silent.

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I simply chose, day after day, to act as if the legacy I wanted already depended on what I did that day (Figure 14).

Legacy becomes real the moment it is translated into action.

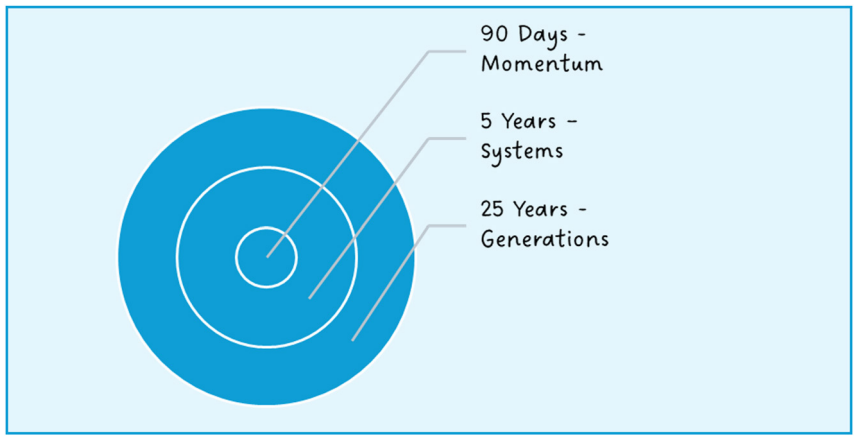


Figure 14 The three legacy horizons.
Leadership legacy is built simultaneously through short-term momentum, medium-term systems change, and long-term generational impact.

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EXERCISE: YOUR THREE-HORIZON LEGACY PLAN

Take 30 minutes today. Use the spaces below (or a notebook) to write your answers. Keep this page visible for the next 90 days.

90-Day Horizon
What is one visible action I will take in the next 90 days that proves I am serious about my legacy?
When will I do it? (specific date)
5-Year Horizon
By 2030, what new capability, relationship, or policy will exist because I chose to invest in it now?
Who is one person or group I need to start building a relationship with today to make this possible?
25-Year Horizon
In 2050, what will children in my community or catchment inherit from my work that they would not have otherwise?
What is one decision I can make this year that moves us closer to that future?
Your Next Step
Schedule one uncomfortable conversation or one small action this week that aligns with your 90-day horizon. Write the date and time here: Date: _____ Time: _____

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Legacy is not a title or a tribute; it is the accumulation of daily choices.
- Leaders who wait for '*someday*' usually discover it never arrives.
- Defining your impact across 90 days (momentum), 5 years (scale), 25 years (generations) turns intention into trajectory.
- The water future we need will only exist if enough people act as if it already depends on them, because it does.

YOUR LEGACY MANIFESTO

(*Print this. Read it when 'someday' feels more comfortable than today.*)

I will no longer wait for permission, perfect conditions, or a bigger title. I will become the kind of leader who acts today as if the rivers, communities, and children of 2050 are already depending on my choices, because they are.

Your legacy is not what people will say about you when you leave.
It is what still works when you are no longer in the room.
Your move.
Write your 90-day action right now, and schedule it.
The future is not waiting.
The water future is already being written, and your signature is on it.

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Conclusion: call to action for young and mid-career leaders

This book was not written to prepare you for a future role.

It was written because you are already in it.

The water sector is crossing a threshold. Climate volatility, ageing infrastructure, digital disruption, social inequity, and political uncertainty are no longer emerging trends; they are daily operating conditions. The old leadership model that waits for certainty, waits for authority, waits for consensus, is quietly failing.

And that failure is not abstract.

It shows up in who has access to water, who bears the risk, and who is left unheard.

It shows up in decisions postponed, responsibilities deflected, and systems pushed just far enough to survive, but not far enough to change.

If you are early in your career, you may feel underqualified.

If you are mid-career, you may feel constrained, by institutions, by expectations, by what feels '*realistic*.'

Both reactions are human.

Neither can become a reason to stand still.

Leadership in the water sector today does not belong only to those at the top. It belongs to those who are willing to act before the system is comfortable, before the rules are fully written, and before the future is guaranteed.

Across these pages, you have seen what this looks like: leaders who acted before certainty, projects that succeeded through honesty rather than safety, and systems that became resilient through trust, inclusion, and shared ownership.

Different contexts. Different scales.

One common thread, simple, and demanding:

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Leadership begins the moment you decide that the future of water is partly your responsibility.

Not someday.

Not when promoted.

Not when conditions improve.

Now.

Your call to action is not to do everything.

It is to do one thing deliberately.

Choose one place where the system is not working, and name it.

Choose one habit, assumption, or silence that no longer serves the future, and stop it.

Choose one conversation, one pilot, one alliance that feels slightly uncomfortable, and begin it.

You do not need permission to care more deeply.

You do not need certainty to act with integrity.

You do not need to be fearless, only honest and persistent.

The future of water will not be shaped by the people who read the most reports or attend the most meetings. It will be shaped by those who decide, quietly, consistently, to lead before they are asked.

This book ends here.

The work, and your leadership, continues in the systems you influence, the decisions you make, and people whose voices you choose to bring into the room next.

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The Author



Blanca Antizar is a civil and environmental engineer with over two decades of international experience driving innovation and collaboration in the water sector. She has worked across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, supporting utilities, governments, and industries to adopt solutions that are technically sound, financially viable, and socially inclusive.

She is the Founder and Director of Antizar Advisory Ltd, created to bridge gaps between sectors, disciplines, and communities in pursuit of a more resilient water future. Blanca is an Honorary Professor at University College London, following a Royal Academy of Engineering Visiting Professorship in Environmental Resilience. She is also a Fellow of the International Water Association, the Institution of Civil Engineers, and the Royal Society of Arts, and serves as an Ambassador for Water Europe.

Her work has been recognised internationally, including the iAgua Woman of the Year Award (2022), and she has been listed among the world's top 2% of scientists in the Stanford University/Elsevier global ranking for multiple consecutive years.

Beyond her technical work, Blanca writes to make complex ideas accessible and meaningful to a wider audience. She began writing non-technical books for her mother, an avid reader who, after the onset of dementia, could no longer engage with the books she once loved. That experience reshaped how Blanca

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thinks about communication; not just as the transfer of knowledge, but as a way to connect, include, and empower.

This book reflects that purpose: to support the next generation of water leaders, at any stage of their career, to act with clarity, courage, and responsibility in a rapidly changing world.

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Leading the Blue Future

Empowering the Next Generation of Water Leaders

Most leadership books focus on managing organisations. Water leadership is different.

It is about stewarding shared resources, balancing human needs with ecological limits, and making decisions when there are no perfect answers. It demands not only technical expertise, but emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and the ability to build trust across disciplines and power structures.

It is not about leadership in theory. It is about leadership as practice, in uncertainty, in complexity, and often before you feel ready. Because leadership is not missing in the water sector. What's missing is yours.

Whether you are starting your career, navigating mid-career constraints, or rethinking your impact after years in the field, this book invites you to step forward, where you are, with what you have, and turn urgency into action.



Blanca Antizar is a civil and environmental engineer with over two decades of international experience driving global innovation and collaboration in the water sector. She has supported utilities, governments, and industries to adopt solutions that are technically sound, financially viable, and socially inclusive.

Her purpose with this book is to support the next generation of water leaders, at any stage of their career, to act with clarity, courage, and responsibility in a rapidly changing world.

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