

Reflections on COURAGE



by Future Leaders 2026

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"Developing the next generation of leaders is essential to how we create long-term value and deliver on our ambition as a safe, reliable and responsible supplier of oil and gas to Europe. The ONS Future Leaders Programme reflects our entrepreneurial spirit and collaborative culture – and we are proud to support the voices that will shape the future of our industry."

Tone Rognstad,
EVP People, Communication, IT & Digital, Vår Energi

Foreword

One of the things I find most rewarding about working at ONS is the opportunity to engage with the next generation of leaders – people who bring fresh eyes, different experiences, and the kind of honest thinking that doesn't take current answers for granted.

The reflections in this piece are the result of exactly that. We asked our ONS Future Leaders to share their perspectives on some of the most pressing questions in energy today – not to give the "right" answers, but to think out loud, challenge assumptions, and say what they actually think.

From new ideas on leadership, the courage to transition, the importance of openness and the need for innovation, these texts reflect the complexity of the world these young leaders are inheriting.

At ONS, we believe that the energy sector will not be shaped by institutions alone. It will be shaped by individuals who are willing to speak up, ask difficult questions, and have the courage to imagine things differently. This publication is our way of making space for that.

It has been a privilege to serve as the editor of this reflection piece, and I am incredibly proud that these voices are now getting the platform they deserve. The energy world needs to hear from the people who will shape its future – and this is one small step towards making that happen. I hope you read these pieces with the same curiosity and appreciation that I did.

A special thank you to Vår Energi for partnering with ONS to make the Future Leaders programme possible.



Iselin Remark Engebretsen
Programme Manager,
ONS Foundation

No one is coming to save your career



Elisabeth Berntsen Gardum
P&O Business Partner, Aker BP

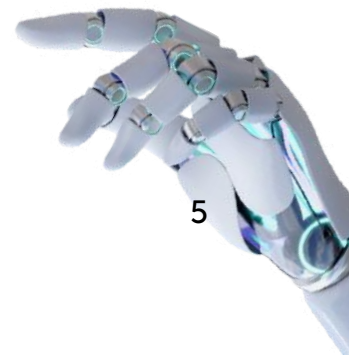
Adaptability over certainty

What counts as relevant competence in the future? No one knows for sure and I suppose it's a moving target. If predictions were accurate, we'd probably have flying cars by now. Instead, we're still debating whether we dare trust self-driving vehicles. What we can say is that the pace of change is accelerating, currently almost uncomfortably fast. Because of this, future human competence is not only a fixed list of skills. It comes down to staying curious, updating skills and being willing to try new approaches to your daily work, all qualities that help us grow alongside technology rather than chase after it. That sounds simple, but it demands humility: a recognition that much of what we need to know still lies ahead of us.

Transition isn't just an energy story

If AI becomes the go-to source for learning, what does that mean for traditional education? Will people still invest in university degrees? Formal education aside, I've relied on YouTube to learn stuff for years, from assembling a stroller to mastering Beyoncé lyrics. Knowledge has been available at our fingertips, just one ad away. AI now makes that look almost old-fashioned.

Tools that once helped me understand things "in real time" have been replaced by systems that tailor answers instantly. I adjust my prompts, set the level of depth, and get clear explanations. I've learned more about AI from AI than anywhere else. If that doesn't signal its influence, nothing does.



The courageous act here isn't using AI. It's accepting that how we learn and how fast, has fundamentally changed. This shift also affects how organisations and educational institutions should think about learning. When knowledge moves this quickly, it's no longer sustainable to create development programmes that take months to build and start ageing the moment they launch.

So what is the employer's responsibility?

"What are you going to do to ensure I have the right competence?" an employee might ask. It's a fair question. But here's the uncomfortable truth: your employer is probably not your best career development strategy. They can offer access to learning and create space for growth, but long-term relevance in a fast-moving field isn't something any organisation can package and hand to you. The employees who stay relevant are the ones who stopped waiting to be developed and started developing themselves. That initiative has to come from you.



Same industry, different you

I doubt my own job will look the same a few years from now. Perhaps you have the same perception about your job? Too many of my tasks could be automated, and too many of us share similar roles that will inevitably disappear or transform beyond recognition. Skills I take pride in being good at will be codified and performed by agents working 24/7. That could feel unsettling, knowing your role might dissolve in its current form, but I try to look at it differently. How can I shape this change instead of resisting it? For me, it starts with mindset. If I use AI proactively, I'm freed from repetitive tasks, I can respond faster, and I have more room for complex work or do something entirely new. Reinvention doesn't have to be a threat. It can be an opportunity, as long as you don't insist on things staying exactly as they are today.

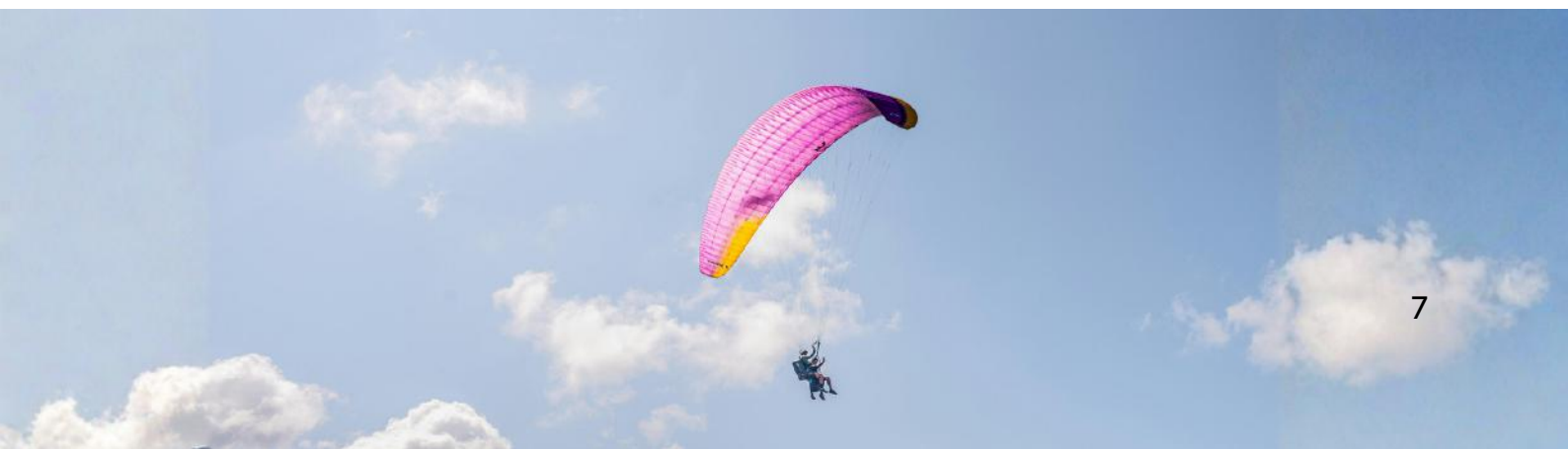
Competence expires. Courage doesn't.

The relevance of your competence isn't guaranteed tomorrow. And being the specialist isn't necessarily enough, you need to evolve within your field and treat your skill set as something dynamic. That means adopting new tools, dropping outdated habits, and adjusting your perspective. It also requires resilience. When circumstances shift and your contribution suddenly holds different value, the people who thrive will be those who see change as part of their professional identity. Humility underpins all of this. Knowing you're never "done" learning keeps you open to new ideas and ways of working. Choosing to stay a beginner, again and again, might be the most underrated form of courage we have. Are you courageous enough to reinvent yourself?

Don't wait for permission

Are you willing to leave your relevance in someone else's hands? Trusting others to safeguard your future career prospects is a risky plan, especially when the world offers abundant learning opportunities, many of them almost free. The main investment is your time, and the return can directly influence your opportunities and earning power.

The era of staying decades in one company and leaving with a gold watch is fading. The new generation prioritises development, opportunity, and growth over stability. As a result, employers cannot (and should not) promise career-long reskilling in the old way. So, take ownership. (And yes, this is also a reminder to myself to put the remote down and do the same.) Find the learning approach that works for you, but don't leave your development to chance. Staying relevant in an AI-first workforce requires initiative. No one is coming to save your career. But you can start. And that decision only requires you.



Navigating turmoil without a map



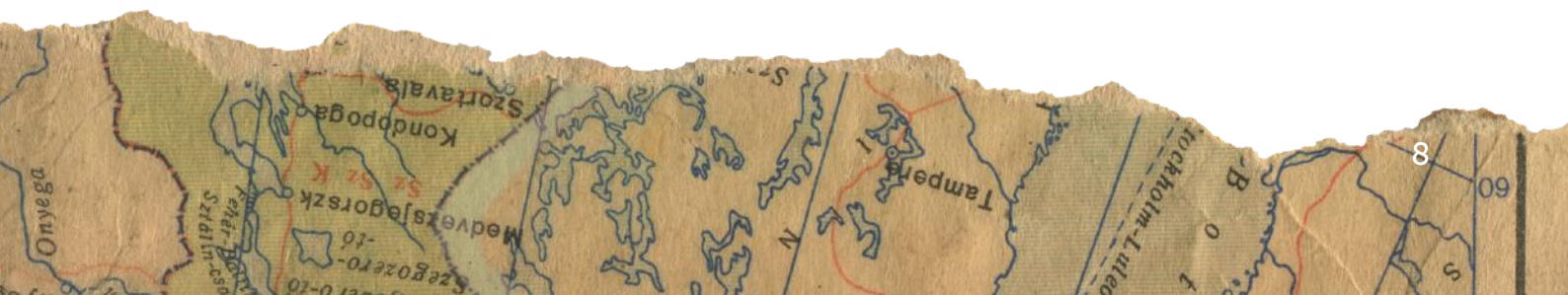
Hugo Liabeuf

Programme Manager, Oil and Gas Climate Initiative (OGCI)

Energy leadership does not reward those who navigate by map. A map assumes the terrain is knowable, that a destination can be fixed and a single route plotted. In an industry where multi-billion capital commitments span thirty years, where the energy transition is real but its pace contested, and where no forecast reliably separates a stranded asset from a generational investment, the map is a dangerous comfort. What the best energy leaders carry instead is a compass: a clear sense of direction, grounded in principles rather than predictions, that allows them to navigate across many possible futures rather than optimise for one. That distinction is easy to articulate and hard to live by.

The problem with maps

The industry faces a unique forecasting problem: today's decisions will be tested by markets, policies, and technologies no one can credibly describe thirty years out. The temptation is to reach for the best available map: medium and long-term energy scenarios and in-house demand models. These are useful tools for reducing uncertainty, but they cannot eliminate it. In 2014, US shale collapsed oil prices within months of most forecasts missing it entirely. In 2020, a pandemic briefly sent futures negative. In 2022, a land war in Europe sent gas prices to records no scenario had placed in its base case. In 2026, the war between the US and Iran, and the resulting closure of the Strait of Hormuz, delivered what leading energy analysts have called the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market. The ubiquity of energy means its maps keep being redrawn.



If the terrain cannot be reliably mapped, the leader's task is not to produce a better map. It is to build an organisation capable of travelling well regardless of what the terrain turns out to be.

The divergence among oil majors over the past decade is instructive. Not because any one company got it right, but because radically different strategies each had their moment of looking prescient, and their moment of looking reckless.



One major's refusal to pivot drew board-level revolts; by 2023 its discipline looked like conviction. Another major's bold announced pivot toward renewables attracted applause; within two years financial returns and the energy crisis forced a quiet retreat. Those who divested early were either ahead of the curve or sellers of assets that continued generating strong returns as prices recovered. No strategy was consistently vindicated: each was, at different moments, both right and wrong, depending on the time horizon you chose to judge it.

The strategies that held up best were not those built around a confident view of where demand was headed. They were built around the fundamental “first principles” of this industry: commitment to health and safety, capital discipline across a range of scenarios, portfolio resilience, and honest communication about uncertainty.

The map-followers moved decisively toward a fixed destination and found the destination had moved. The compass-holders kept their bearing.



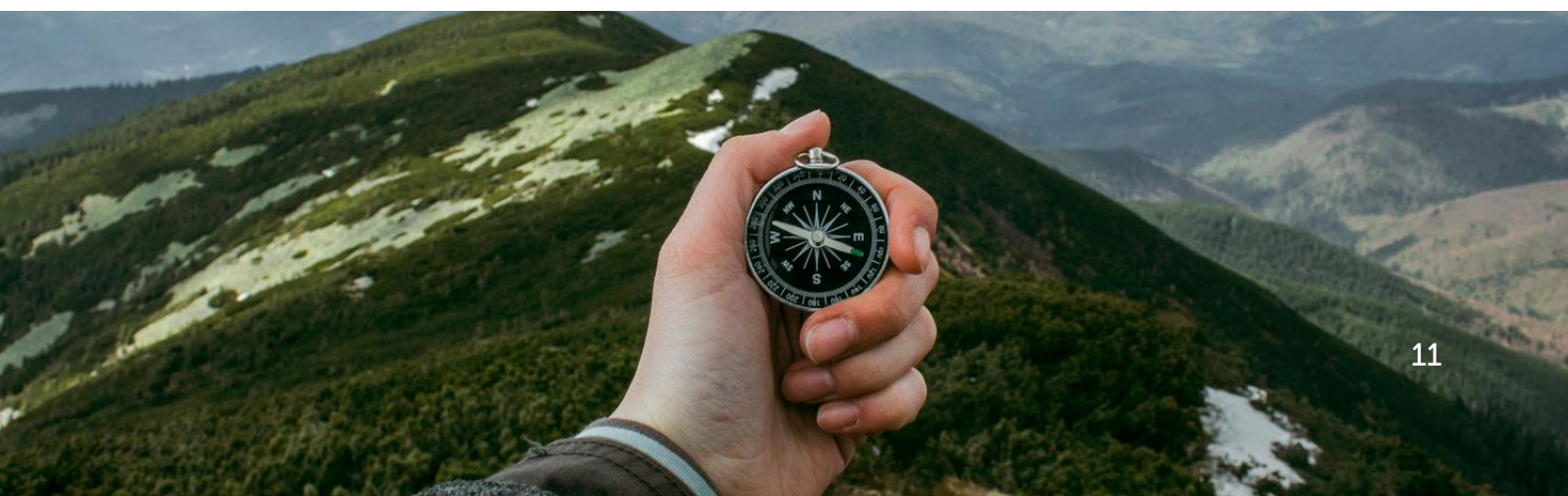
The war in Iran brings this from the abstract into the present. Will the closure of the Strait of Hormuz reshape the energy paradigm – extending the life of hydrocarbons as importers scramble to diversify away from single points of failure – or will it accelerate decarbonisation, as the price of dependence is judged intolerable? Governments are drawing opposite conclusions from the same event. No one can predict which reading the next decade will vindicate; one can only be positioned for both. The end goal is not certainty, but readiness.

What a compass actually means

A compass is not a vague aspiration. In practice, it means testing every major investment decision against a range of futures rather than a single forecast: does this allocation make sense if oil demand peaks in 2030? Does it survive if it peaks in 2040? Is it resilient to a carbon price shock, a technology surprise, a geopolitical rupture?

It means preserving optionality. It is not a synonym for indecision, but a deliberate strategy in an environment where the cost of being wrong is asymmetric and often irreversible. Keeping options open is expensive - in forgone returns, slower commitments, and the frustration of those who want a decision now - but that cost is almost always smaller than the cost of bearing the brunt of a wrongful decision that cannot be undone. Choosing is the last thing a compass-leader does, not the first, and the organisation should never bet the bank on a single possible future. And it means anchoring strategy in what the organisation genuinely does well: generating returns from complex, capital-intensive operations that can fund the transition rather than pretend it has already arrived.

In practice, this shows up in specific moments of refusal: declining to announce a 2050 net-zero target the business cannot honestly underwrite; holding oil-and-gas assets when shareholders demand a louder green pivot; committing transition capex when the CFO wants buybacks; admitting publicly that a previous strategy was wrong. These are the visible costs of compass-leadership: the moments when the organisation will look, from the outside, slow or indecisive. They are also the moments that separate conviction from fashion.



The harder problem: Leading people without a destination

Strategy is the easier half of this challenge. The harder half is human: boards demand targets, investors want roadmaps, employees need enough certainty to make decisions and enough purpose to stay committed. The pressure to produce a map, even a fictional one, is enormous and relentless. Resisting it while still providing coherent direction is perhaps the defining test of energy leadership today.

What compass-leaders offer instead is not certainty about the destination but confidence in the organisation's ability to navigate. They communicate direction clearly - the transition is real, capital discipline is non-negotiable, legacy cash flows fund the future rather than substitute for it - while being honest that the route will be adapted as conditions change. This requires a tolerance for ambiguity that is genuinely uncommon, and a willingness to be misread as indecisive by those who mistake confidence for certainty. It also requires consistency: a compass is only useful if the principles it encodes are stable even when the external landscape is not.



There is a particular pressure on energy executives to project certainty they cannot honestly possess. The courage this industry demands is not the courage to pick a bold prediction and defend it. It is the courage to say: we know the direction, we understand the forces acting on us, and we have built an organisation capable of navigating toward a future we cannot fully see. In an industry where the terrain keeps changing, that is not a counsel of humility. It is the only kind of leadership that holds.

What an Arctic Childhood, Bodø/Glimt and America can teach Europe about leadership & innovation

Ambition, capital, and the Arctic as Europe's energy proving ground



Håkon Gustafson Giæver

Business Development Manager, Norinova

I grew up in the Arctic, where the landscape teaches patience and the climate teaches humility. Later, I spent two of my early adult years living in the United States, where I discovered something else entirely. I realized from spending time with the people there that ambition is not simply a virtue but also currency. The Americans I met on my path treated bold ideas the way our Arctic communities treat daylight in winter.

You hold onto it fiercely and refuse to let it fade, nurturing it with a kind of defiant optimism that refuses to accept limits.

In Europe, ambition is often wrapped in caution and precision. Growth forecasts are measured in decimals, scaling companies nationally, first. In the US, ambition sounds like a declaration of destiny. "We will colonize Mars by the end of the quarter".



Velocity, Capital and the Power of Narrative

Investors gravitate toward that confidence, even when it borders on improbable, because boldness magnetizes capital. It is not that Europe lacks this competence, infrastructure or creativity. What we often lack is the belief that world-shaping companies can actually come from here and should.

What shaped me as a young dreamer in the Arctic was discipline and resilience. What shaped me in the United States was speed. Europe tends to prepare, analyze and perfect. The US moves, tests and adjusts because they know that a product that barely works but launches today will in many instances outcompete a perfect product that just sits in a PowerPoint file.

From my experience working closely with research and innovation environments, I have seen the pattern clearly: Europe files patents; the US builds companies. The difference is velocity and behind velocity there is always capital.



In his 2024 report on European innovation competitiveness Mario Draghi argues that Europe must urgently “close the innovation gap” by dramatically increasing risk-willing investment, noting that European startups rely heavily on bank loans instead of the kind of venture capital that fuels rapid experimentation.

Europe does not suffer from a shortage of ideas or research. Europe suffers from a shortage of risk willing investment. Bureaucracy is not the true barrier. Denmark as an example is one of the easiest countries in Europe for IPOs thanks to a supportive regulatory framework, simplified prospectus rules, and stable, transparent market conditions that reduce cost and complexity for companies going public. Yet the US, with its endless forms and higher complexity, continues to dominate.

Capital makes complexity irrelevant and when capital flows, innovation pushes through whatever stands in the way.

But capital is not the only difference. The cultures of communication are worlds apart. In Northern Europe, adequate is a compliment. In the US, awesome is merely the starting point. American founders are masters of framing: turning prototypes into revolutions and setbacks into temporary detours. This is not exaggeration. It is narrative strategy. It is the understanding that people do not invest only in what exists, but in what might exist.

It took me years to understand that storytelling is not a distortion of truth, but a multiplier of possibility. When paired with the Arctic instinct for realism, it becomes an extraordinarily powerful force.

Lessons from Bodø/Glimt can Redefine the Future Arctic Ambitions

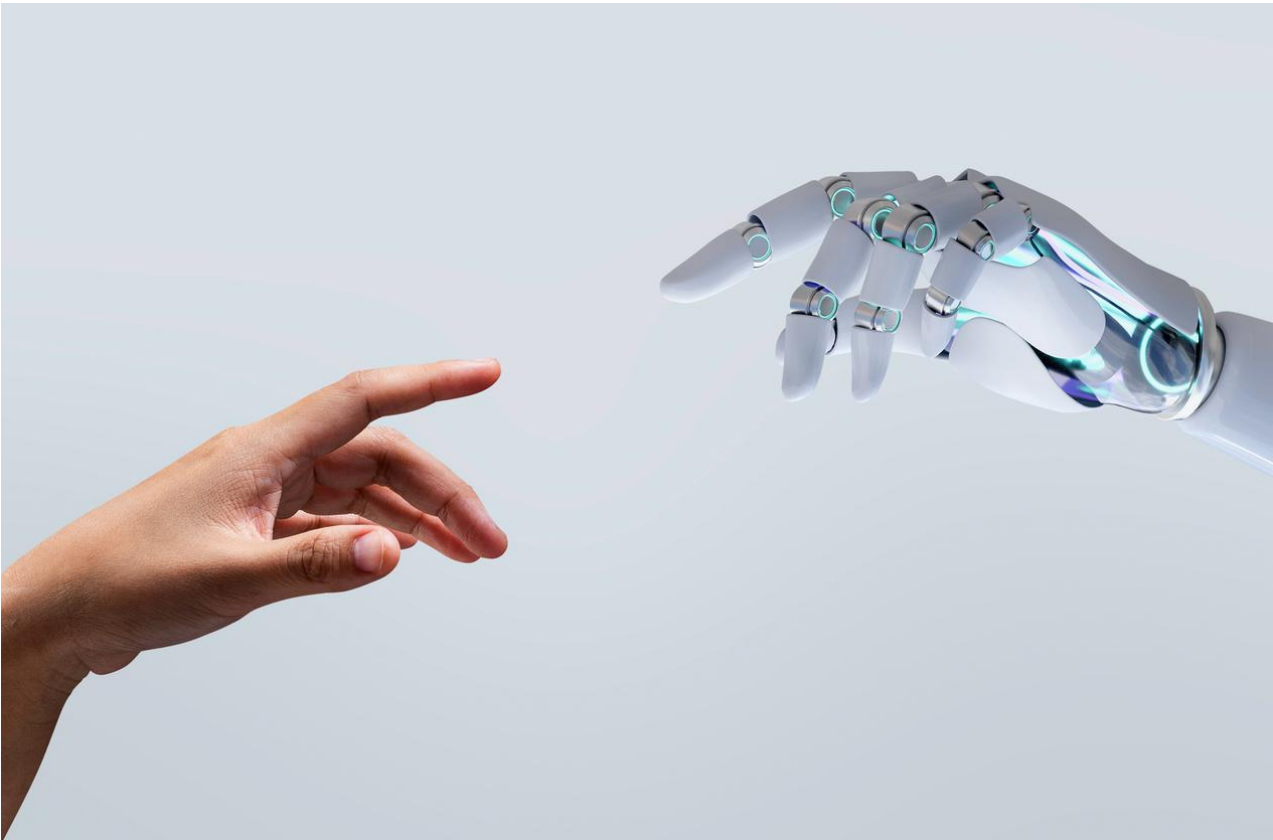
In the Arctic, failure isn't fatal. It's information. You learn, adjust, and try again. That mirrors why a football club like my childhood team Bodø/Glimt from the far north who was relegated in 2016 goes on to reach the round of 16 in the world's biggest stage for football: the Champions League. They did not rely on privilege or spending power. They reinvented their culture, trained differently and built mental strength into their foundation. Above all, believed in something bigger than themselves.

That willingness to redefine norms; to challenge the status quo is exactly what the Arctic needs now.

The Arctic sits at the center of the global energy transition. It is warming faster than any other region. It is geopolitically sensitive and strategically essential. Yet sometimes it is still described as isolated, distant or fragile like a frozen museum.



In reality, it is the perfect testbed for the energy innovations of the future. Extreme climates expose weak technologies. Small communities reveal the limits of infrastructure. Remote environments reveal flaws in planning and high-quality proprietary data creates a unique environment for developing world-class AI-driven innovations.



The stakes are so much higher here and therefore, the solutions must be better.

Leadership in the Arctic means building systems that can endure for generations. It means being willing to innovate even when the path is unclear. It means trusting that daring and discipline together, as a team, like Bodø/Glimt has demonstrated; can unlock disproportionate impact. If Europe and the Arctic is to realize this opportunity, it must unlock far more capital.

Talent is not our problem. Research output is not our problem. Scale is.



Europe needs new incentives, new mechanisms and renewed courage behind investment decisions.

What if profits from newly issued European shares were tax-free?
What if early-stage investors were rewarded rather than punished?
What if our financial systems encouraged risk instead of penalizing it?
Innovation would not just grow. It would accelerate beyond anything we have seen before.

As a 29-year-old who grew up in the Arctic, I believe this region can lead the world in energy resilience, not despite its challenges but because of them. I believe Europe can match the ambition of the United States if we give ourselves permission to try.

Leadership is not preserving what exists.
Leadership is stepping forward when the world expects more.
The Arctic has done that before.
Europe has done that before.

It is time to do it again.

A maturing NCS: why collaboration matters now



Ivy Becker

Project Manager Area Development, Equinor

The Norwegian Continental Shelf (NCS) is entering a mature state, but it is not running out of resources. To be able to unlock them, we need to collaborate in new fit-for-purpose ways.

Today's prognoses from Norskepetroleum indicate that half of all expected recoverable resources have already been produced. Several offshore infrastructures are approaching the end of their expected lifespans. Offshore Norge reports that 300 wells are anticipated to be plugged by 2032, alongside extensive installation removals. Almost 300,000 tonnes of removal weight and the cleaning and isolation of more than 600 km of subsea pipelines are part of this scope. This huge decommissioning scope will come with new tasks and both technical and financial, as well as commercial challenges.



The constraint: regulations and uncertainty in planning

The Norwegian system has regulations and requirements for decommissioning, involving safety and environmental aspects, in place. However, with increasing knowledge and experience gain, changes to this as for example related to better alignment and updated rules for reuse and recycling practices are likely to be expected. Thus, an increased need for standardisation and stronger cross-industry collaboration will be seen in the years to come to mitigate the risk of costly delays and uncertainty in the planning process.



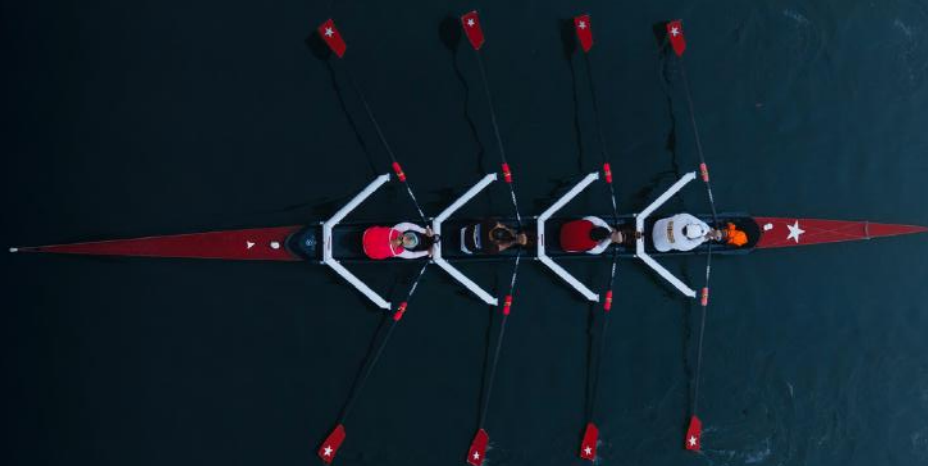
Not only regulatory evolution is both needed and challenging, but also how we operate on the NCS licenses today. We are facing a structural mismatch: value creation increasingly depends on fast, low-cost marginal developments, while governance, commercial models and decision processes are still designed for large, long-cycle projects.

In my daily work in Equinor, I see several examples of this. Keeping production levels and thus, our deliveries and income high, is increasingly dependent on marginal volumes. Those small new fields need to be tied-back to existing infrastructures, that are themselves at the other side of the field life curve, reaching end of lifetime. In addition, license structures are often complex with different owner structures in the host and tie-in licenses. All parties share the common goal of increasing volumes on the NCS.

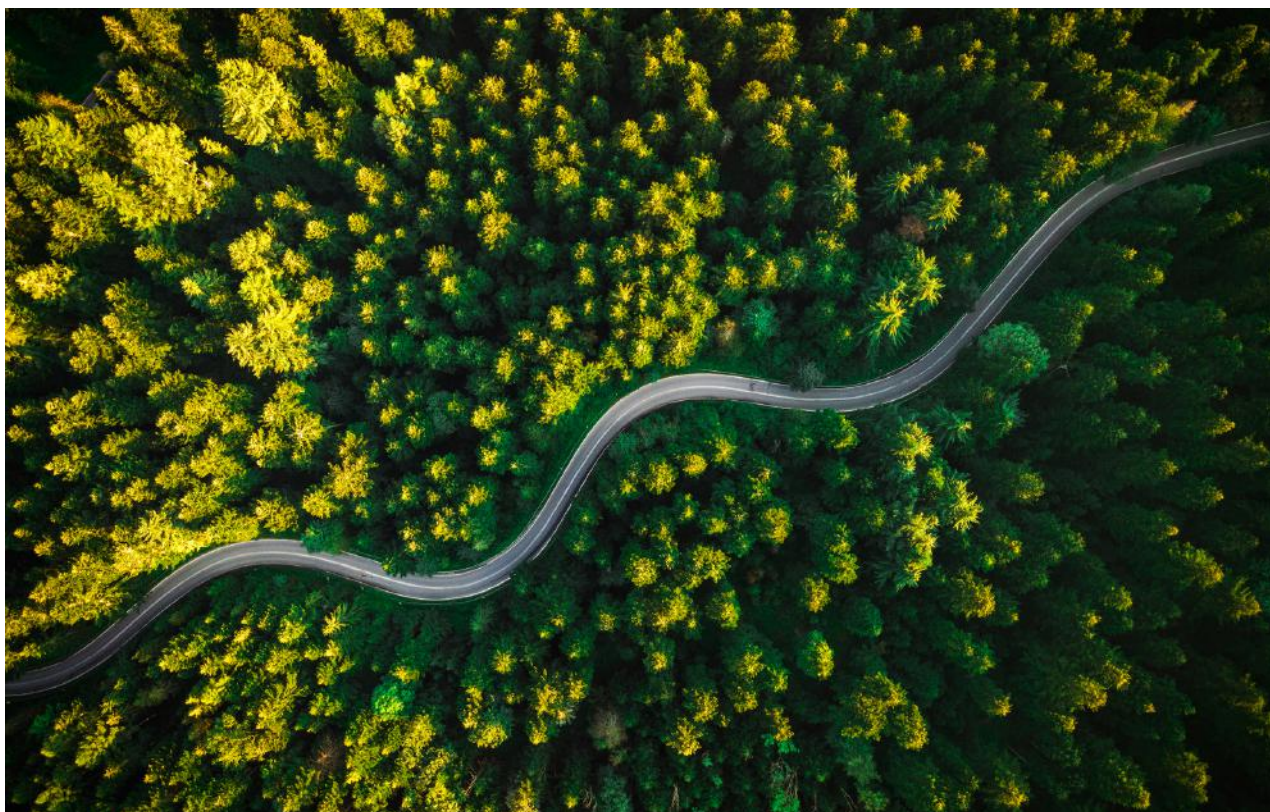
However, we face a big dilemma due to the complexity of commercial agreements, restricted information sharing, various owner interests, technical challenges on aging facilities, and particularly the uncertainty around the lifetime of host structures. As a result, there is the risk of not being able to find an economical solution to develop those volumes. So, in the end, everyone loses, if we do not manage to find new ways to collaborate and create a win-win situation.

Simpler models, faster decisions and trust-based collaboration

How can we achieve this? The easy answer seems to be by simplification and more pragmatic and efficient decision-making processes. However, this requires courage and openness from all actors on the NCS. Marginal volumes cannot be fetched with long decision and negotiation processes, and unflexible tie-in agreements that have worked in the past but are not ready for the new phase we are entering. Changes will need to be based on trust and willingness to collaborate in a new way. This might also include solutions that focus on an area optimisation rather than maximisation gain for each partner involved, meaning that making some sacrificing decisions for the greater good might be essential. Incorporation of new processes, change processes, and implementing learning of first attempts from one license area to another will require a common effort and resources to make this work.



But I believe that in the long term, we have a chance of being more efficient due to simplified structures which then will allow us to free up resources and better utilise existing infrastructure, and thus, increasing value together.



Equinor is undergoing the biggest organisational change probably since the Norsk Hydro and Statoil merger, reacting to the new situation on the NCS and implementing an organisational structure ready to open for new and more streamlined processes. It gives me confidence that we will find smart solutions for the future, however, this transition can only succeed if all actors are willing to work closely together. For that, organizational change is necessary, but not sufficient.

Without parallel changes in commercial models, regulatory flexibility and incentive structures, the risk is that we reorganize ourselves into the same outcomes. Both, authorities and industry need to collaborate to find simpler and more flexible frameworks to promote faster decision-making. Without this, we all risk not being able to develop further resources in a profitable way – but together, we have the chance of overall value creation.

Leading specialists whose decades of experience exceed my own age



Astrid Fossgård

DCC & LCI Manager, Vår Energi

When I first stepped into a leadership role, I knew I would be responsible for people. What I did not fully grasp was that most of them had nearly as many years of experience as I have lived on this earth. Specialists with decades of knowledge, technical depth, and lived history in the industry - turning to me for direction, clarity, and leadership.

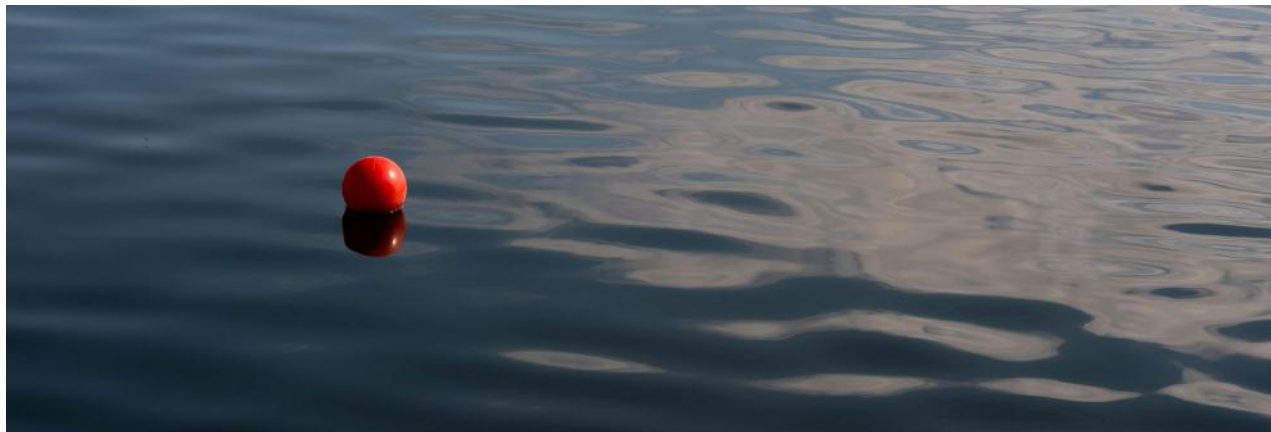
It's easy to romanticize: 'What an opportunity to learn from the best.' And it is. But it also comes with the quiet pressure, unspoken expectations, and the constant awareness that I am the youngest in the room - but not the least accountable.

Have you ever entered a room and felt the people silently assessing you before you even opened your mouth? I know that feeling. And instead of letting it unsettle me, it pushed me to reflect on what leadership really is: how to create trust, alignment, and movement in a team where expertise and authority don't sit in the same chair.



Thrown into deep water - and learning to swim

Leading these specialists often feel like being thrown into deep water with only one floater - expected to stay afloat and learn how to swim at the same time.



There are moments when I wonder if they can sense the split second where I hesitate internally, even while projecting confidence externally. My inner dialogue is constant:

- Do they notice when I hesitate?
- Am I asking the right questions?
- How do I balance their experience with the strategic perspective I'm here to bring?

Perhaps you've had a moment like that too, where you knew you couldn't simply 'fake it,' so you had to grow into the responsibility right then and there?

Those moments can feel uncomfortable, but that's where growth begins. They have shaped how I show up - more prepared, more curious, more intentional. Ultimately, they've made me a better leader.

Authority without seniority

Leadership is not mechanical, it is relational. How I feel affects how I behave, and how I behave affects whether people trust me, follow me, or hold back.

Have you ever been responsible for leading people who knew far more about the subject than you did? If so, you know how quickly it forces you to rethink what leadership actually demands.

I've learned that my job is not to know more, but to create space where their knowledge can have real impact. I feel encouraged when these specialists challenge me, not to challenge my authority, but to elevate the work. And I feel a deep sense of responsibility - not just for the work, but for the people behind the work.

Over the past year, one thing has become absolutely clear: trust isn't given because of age, title, or expertise. Trust is earned when people see that you listen, set direction and follow through, and you treat their experience with genuine respect.



The doubt

I'll be honest. I have doubted myself - many times, even when others believed in me. Perhaps you have too? I think most of us have, but we rarely say it out loud.

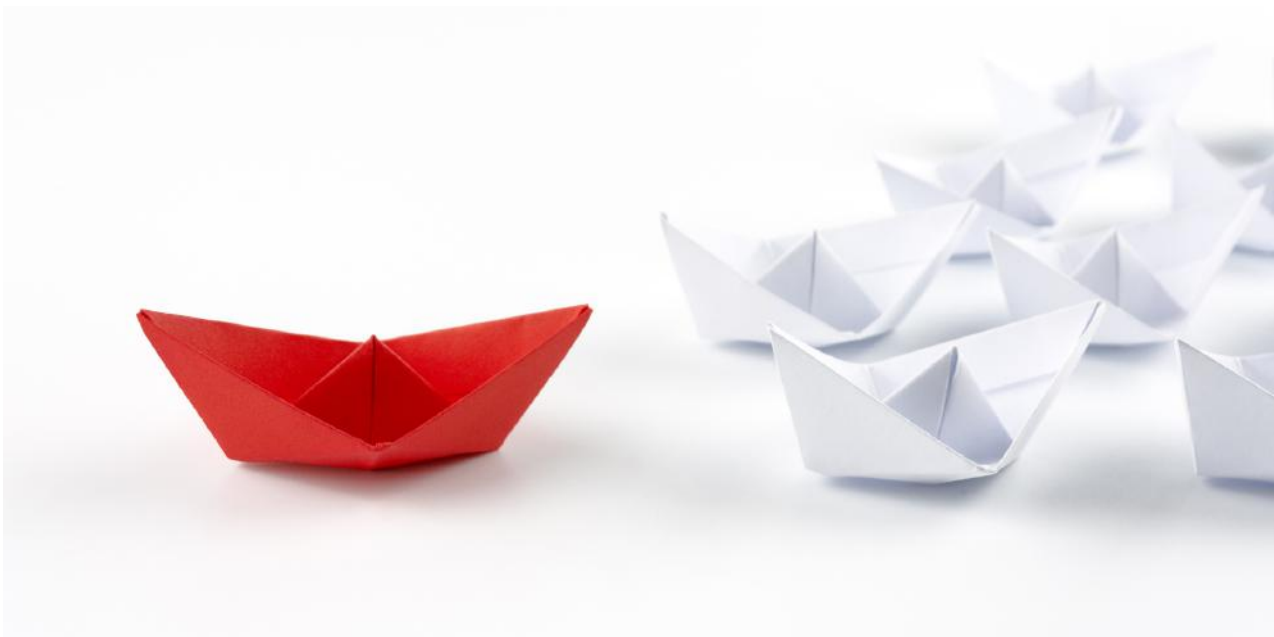
I have asked questions I feared might sound like I do not fit in the role. I have wondered whether someone in the room thought 'What is she doing here?' and comparing my age to my title.

Doubt has taught me something essential.

I've seen that acknowledging what I don't know often earns more respect than pretending I do. My job is not to compete with specialists, but to set direction and create an environment where they can excel. I've learned that leadership credibility is built through consistency, honesty, preparation, and courage.

When younger leaders and experienced specialists collaborate well, the organization benefits in ways that go beyond the individuals involved. Younger leaders bring energy, structure, new perspectives, and a push for adaptability. Senior specialists bring depth, historical context, quality, and technical excellence.

When trust grows between the two, psychological safety strengthens and innovation increases. Culture improves - because people see leadership as behavior, not hierarchy.



What I take forward

Leading senior specialists has reshaped my understanding of leadership. Influence does not come from age or technical depth, but from how I listen, act, and show up - every day.

I want to build a culture where experience is honored, curiosity encouraged, and leadership defined by behavior. A culture where specialists feel safe to challenge, leaders feel safe to admit uncertainties, and teams feel safe to grow together. That is the kind of leadership I aspire to - and the kind of culture I hope to build.

When experience isn't enough: The courage to question



Brage Mothes
Project Engineer, Subsea7

The limits of experience

Experience is a powerful resource, and like any resource, it can become limiting when used the same way every time.

Norway's success in oil and gas is built on decades of experience, lessons, and regulations shaped by both achievement and failure. These frameworks have delivered commendable safety, predictability, and profitability, and they deserve respect. They are the reason Norwegian offshore operations are trusted worldwide. Yet over time, rules and inherited work methods tend to solidify into unquestioned truths - and although designed to protect and guide, they can quietly begin to limit new thinking.



Early in the ONS future leaders' program, a personality analysis highlighted a tendency in me to challenge established methods and guidelines. Initially, this led me to consider whether I am simply inclined to resist rules, but that interpretation did not resonate with me. I have never found myself to be someone who pushes back for the sake of it. Instead, I believe any input should be adopted through genuine understanding, rather than passive acceptance.

Most established methods and guidelines are created in response to specific events, intended to protect and improve our systems over time. Although essential, they are shaped by the conditions under which they were developed, inherently limiting their ability to anticipate every situation in which they may later be applied. Courage in this context is not about ignoring or disregarding experience, but about knowing when to rely on it - and when to question it. That distinction grows increasingly relevant when the challenges we face outgrow the guidance of our familiar methods.

When familiarity fails to guide us

In the offshore energy sector, we operate in environments where safety is non-negotiable, where precision matters, and where consequences can be severe. It is natural that we lean on what has worked before. However, the evolution of our industry keeps leading us to areas where the past cannot always guide us. Next-generation energy solutions and modern work methods are not simply extensions of our current practices, but require new thinking, new collaboration, and courage to effectively reshape our established practices. This can feel challenging in an industry defined by a strong engineering heritage, where proven solutions have shaped not only our systems, but also our confidence in how work is done. But in times of transition, it is essential not to let this comfort subtly limit our willingness to adapt.



A clear example of this is how we approach environmental impact. As the argument for change is no longer driven only by innovation, but by responsibility, the effort to reduce environmental footprints is reshaping what “good enough” looks like. Adapting to this reality is not a quick adjustment but a long-term effort that demands perseverance as much as technical insight.



Awareness and understanding are important, but acting on it is even more so. In practice, we need to maintain the willingness to step outside our comfort zone and ask: *Why do we do it this way? What assumptions are we carrying? What if the conditions have changed?* It is the drive to challenge the invisible rules - the ones we follow not because they are written down, but because that’s how we’ve always done it.

This kind of courage is not loud or dramatic. It is subtle, deliberate, and often uncomfortable. It requires curiosity - to explore new domains, technologies, and ways of working. It requires humility - to admit our expertise, while valuable, is not always enough. It requires trust - in our colleagues, in our teams, and in the idea that change and innovation does not threaten our identity but strengthens it.

This courage is not new; it has long been present in our industry, shaping our practices from the beginning. It is the same courage that enables us to keep learning when experience reaches its limits.

Learning beyond what we know

Compliance does not equal excellence. Excellence comes from people who adapt, question, and think critically. Interestingly, the established methods and guidelines we now comply with were essentially built by the same type of people - someone who questioned an assumption, someone who saw a gap, or recognized that the existing approach was no longer enough. The very rules we now adhere to were once acts of courage by people willing to think differently.

In practice, speaking up when established methods feel outdated or misaligned is not to challenge them, but to contribute to them. The same mindset that created our practices is the mindset required to keep improving them. Experience, while invaluable, can also create blind spots. Familiar ways of working can make limitations harder to recognize. Challenging established ways of working helps us avoid slipping into routine thinking. It forces us to reexamine assumptions we didn't realize we were making.



Progression and innovation rely on courage and curiosity. Asking genuine questions - not to challenge authority, but to understand - opens the door to improvements and ensures expertise remains sharp and relevant. By approaching our work with humility and openness to change, we create a culture for sharing insight and potential we might otherwise miss. In an industry where no single person sees the full picture, progress depends on our willingness to learn from one another, combine perspectives, and let collective understanding guide better decisions.

The greatest limitation lies in believing we already know. Recognizing this is what allows us to keep learning beyond what we know today.

Why can't you see that emerging markets are scale-ups?



Glory William Kweka

Strategy and Business Development Associate, Equinor

About me

My name is Glory. I come from Tanzania and now work in strategy for an international energy company in Norway. Growing up in Tanzania and living in Norway has allowed me to experience life from two very different worlds – the Global South and the Global North. My journey has shaped the way I see and understand these two worlds, and it has been a journey full of questions.

For instance, in 2014, several oil and gas companies left Tanzania. It was a business decision to close their offices because their projects were no longer considered attractive. But I was there, and I can tell you that it did not feel like a business decision to the people left behind. What was a simple strategic decision in the boardroom of these companies had real consequences for people in Tanzania. Hopes of natural gas jobs were deferred – not because the gas wasn't there, but because someone, somewhere, decided that Tanzania wasn't worth the risk.

That was the moment I asked the question: how are decisions to “leave a country” made? This sparked my career shift from engineering to finance and energy economics. I got my answer. But moving to Norway, sitting in strategy meetings, and watching where capital goes – and where it doesn't – I find myself asking another question.

One I would like to ask investors in the Global North: **Why can't you see that emerging markets are scale-ups?**



When I ask colleagues working for clean technology investment firms why they don't invest in emerging markets, they give two main reasons: "emerging markets are risky" or "we leave emerging markets for development finance institutions." Honestly, it feels like déjà vu – but this time, I'm experiencing it from the opposite side.



But let me tell you what I see when I look at emerging markets: I see scale-ups.

I see markets with proven energy demand, growing populations, abundant mineral resources, and technologies ready to be deployed. I see a great opportunity to invest – but in geographies that investors have been taught to avoid. You have been fed a narrative coloured by poverty and aid headlines for so long that you see emerging markets through a lens of struggle rather than opportunity. But by clinging to old narratives, you risk overlooking what could be the next scale-up – and here is why.

Emerging markets are scale-ups – here is why

A scale-up has a proven product-market fit. In the same way, emerging markets are experiencing rapid energy demand growth driven by population growth, urbanisation, and industrialisation. The IEA Global Energy review from 2025 highlights that 2023 and 2024, 80% of the increase in global energy demand came from emerging markets. The need for energy in these markets is more certain than almost anywhere else in the world. People in emerging markets do not have the luxury of cherry-picking energy technologies – they want energy in any shape or form.

Scale-ups have a tried-and-tested approach that is ready for investment. The tools are here – solar panels, mini-grids, battery storage – they are not ideas anymore. The challenge is not about inventing something new; it is about scaling up what already works.



One thing to keep in mind: scale-ups reward early movers disproportionately. In emerging markets, first movers set the terms, build relationships, and gain a competitive edge that is hard to replicate. It seems that investors from the East are already aware of this and acting fast. In the last decade, Chinese interests in the African mineral sector have risen significantly, particularly in minerals such as lithium, cobalt, and copper.

The narrative around emerging markets needs to change. We need to start seeing these markets through the lens of opportunity. And with the right lens, we can identify the right structures for investment in these high-growth markets – such as project finance and blended finance. The fact that these markets carry higher risk does not make them uninvestable.

High risk does not make emerging markets uninvestable

The perception that emerging markets are too risky to warrant investment is limiting. While it is true that these markets often come with higher levels of uncertainty, that does not inherently make them uninvestable. There are numerous financing instruments – such as project finance and blended finance – that can serve as risk management tools to unlock capital in high-risk markets. Investors need to shift their focus from avoiding risk to actively managing it, and position themselves to benefit from the growth and scale that emerging markets have to offer.

In short, high risk does not equal uninvestable. Risk is something you manage, not avoid – and it is time we rethought how to finance energy in emerging markets.

This is not theoretical. There are examples of countries that have redefined energy finance through blended and project finance to scale up energy solutions. One is ZimREF, a blended-finance fund in Zimbabwe aiming to raise over USD 100 million to finance renewable projects that improve energy access and support economic growth. In Tanzania – my home country – CRDB Bank's Kijani Bond, a green bond now listed on the Luxembourg Stock Exchange, raised approximately USD 65.7 million to fund renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, clean cooking energy, green buildings, sustainable transport, and water and sanitation systems.



These examples show how energy infrastructure finance is being reimagined across emerging markets. The notion that these regions are “too risky” to invest in no longer holds.

This is an opportunity to reframe the narrative around emerging markets and start seeing them through a lens of opportunity. It is an invitation to investors in the Global North to be courageous enough to challenge old narratives and to innovate their approach to financing energy infrastructure in emerging markets. We cannot afford to keep overlooking these markets. By doing so, we risk missing out on the kind of growth that comes from backing a promising early-stage scale-up. Let's act now.

Courage in a world that is already changing



Karen Hegrestad
Production Chemist, SLB

The world is no longer debating whether climate change is real. The debate has moved on. The question now is whether we have the courage to face what is already happening – and to act accordingly.

Heat records are broken every year. Floods, droughts, storms, and fires hit harder and more often. Food systems are strained and energy systems are stressed. And the hardest truth is this: the people who contributed the least are often the ones paying first and paying the most. This is not a future scenario. It is the current state of the world.

My point is simple: a fair energy transition must prioritize adapting to climate impacts – not just prevent future ones.

Mitigation remains vital. It is also slow.

We must cut emissions fast. That has not changed. We need clean power, electrification, efficiency, better materials, and innovation that makes low-carbon choices cheaper and more practical.

But mitigation works on a delay. Even if we accelerate, the climate will keep changing for decades. I don't want us to confuse motion for progress. Targets matter. Headlines matter. But if people are already being hit, then adaptation is not optional. That is why adaptation must move from the margins to the center.



Adaptation is not surrender

For some, adaptation sounds like defeat - as if planning for impacts means giving up on prevention. I see it differently. We adapt to risk every day. We build flood defenses. We design hospitals to withstand emergencies. No one calls that defeatism. We call it engineering, foresight, and care.

Climate adaptation should be treated the same way.

I work in a sector built on risk management. Offshore, a weather window can close in hours. Nobody argues with the ocean. We change the plan, add redundancy, and protect people and critical assets. That mindset – anticipate, adjust, endure – is exactly what climate adaptation requires.



The inequality line: Where the transition becomes real

Adaptation forces us to look directly at inequality, because climate change is not distributed evenly.

Two families can face the same flood. One has insurance, savings, stable jobs, and a government that rebuilds quickly. The other lives paycheck to paycheck, in housing that was vulnerable even before the storm, and with limited access to healthcare. Both lose a home. Only one recovers.

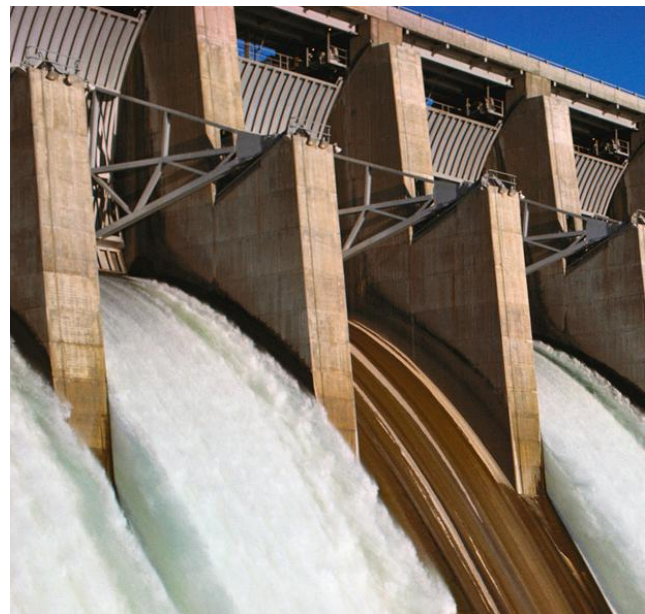
That is what vulnerability looks like: not just exposure to hazard, but the capacity to cope and rebuild. Climate impacts magnify what is already unequal. A failed harvest becomes hunger. A power outage shuts down water supply and basic services. A heatwave becomes lethal when cooling is unavailable and healthcare is stretched. In places already constrained by poverty, conflict, weak institutions, or fragile infrastructure, climate shocks can erase years of progress in a single season.

This is why I keep coming back to fairness. A transition that is not felt as fair will not last. Public consent is not a “soft” issue; it is the foundation of continuity under pressure. When people feel left behind, trust collapses. When trust collapses, misinformation spreads, friction rises, and the politics of transition harden. We retreat to what we know. We choose short-term safety over long-term strategy. Adaptation is how we protect legitimacy. It is how we protect trust.

Energy is the platform for protection

Energy is not just another sector; it is the platform that supports the rest. Without dependable power, adaptation is not protection. This is why climate adaptation cannot be separated from energy realism. The energy transition must balance three demands that often collide: security, affordability, and sustainability. If security weakens, everything becomes brittle. If affordability breaks, public consent fractures. Sustainability remains non-negotiable, because physics does not compromise.

I believe courage is naming these trade-offs early and managing them deliberately - so people do not pay the price for our hesitation.



The transition is also climate-exposed: heat strains grids, drought challenges hydropower, and volatile weather increases the value of storage and redundancy. If we fail to adapt our energy systems, we slow decarbonization itself.

Energy demand is still rising as billions seek basic dignity through jobs, clean cooking, and cooling. That sets a standard: cut emissions fast while making today's energy cleaner by reducing methane, improving efficiency, electrifying where possible, and scale carbon capture solutions.

What we should do now

If adaptation is protection, then we should treat it the same way we treat any other form of protection: make it standard practice, fund it properly, and measure whether it works. That starts by building resilience into design from day one – build infrastructure for heat, flooding, and more extreme conditions.

Second, we should treat adaptation as development. The most effective resilience often looks like basics: electricity and cooling, water and sanitation, resilient housing, functioning health systems, and early warning signals that reach everyone.

And finally, it requires a shift in how we allocate capital: fund outcomes, not intentions. Resilience can feel expensive because success is invisible – there's no ribbon-cutting for the disaster that never happened. But avoided downtime creates value, avoided recovery preserves capital, and social stability is an asset we cannot afford to neglect.





Choosing courage over comfort

It is always more comfortable to focus on ambitions that lie safely in the future than on problems already at our feet. Adaptation forces us to look directly at damage, inequality, and limits. But courage has never been about comfort. Courage is choosing to act when outcomes are uncertain.

I want us to hold two truths at once: we must cut emissions fast, and we must adapt intelligently. Mitigation builds a cleaner future. Adaptation protects people in the imperfect present.

At ONS, this should not be an unfamiliar mindset. The North Sea is built on risk management, high standards, and operational realism. It is built on the understanding that risk does not disappear when you stop talking about it. The world is already changing. The only real question left is whether we face that reality with denial or with courage.

The courage for transition



Abbas Tariverdi
Technology Lead, Aker Solutions

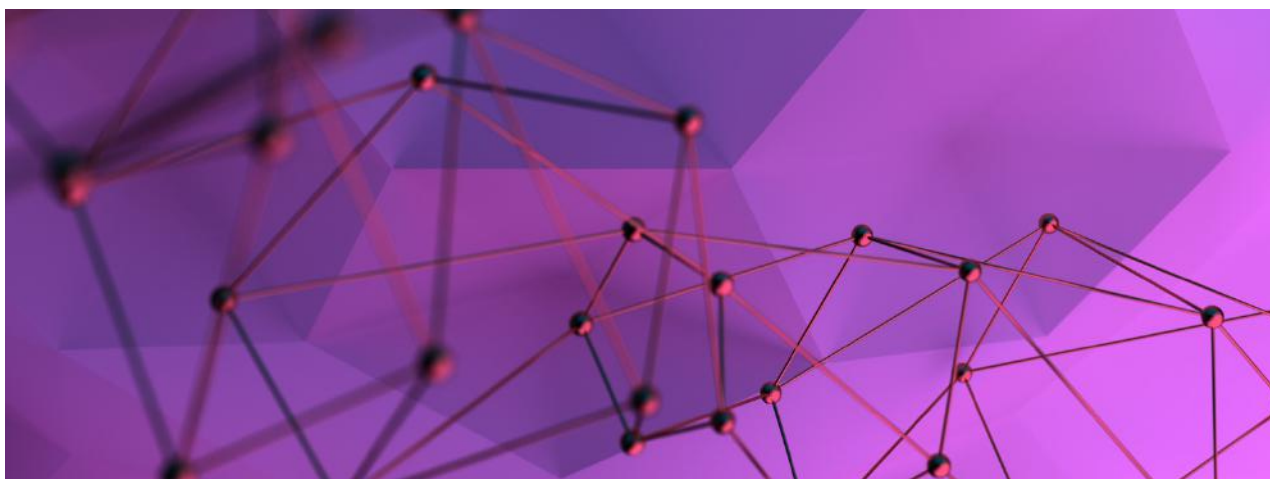
Deploying robots and building data architectures teaches you one lesson very quickly. In almost every project, the technology is ready long before the people are. Today, I see this exact same pattern paralyzing the global energy transition. Most people view the shift to clean energy as a technical challenge, but progress is actually stalled by fear, passive hope, and institutional inertia. What is missing is courage. We have the tools, but we lack the willingness to use them before we feel completely safe. That willingness is what I mean by courage.



I am not certain we will succeed, but I am certain that without courage, we will most likely fail. In my field of robotics and control systems, courage looks like commissioning a thoroughly tested system that you cannot fully predict in the real world. You act anyway, because waiting for perfect certainty means never acting at all. The energy transition operates on this exact logic, just on a civilizational scale.

The reality

People often misdiagnose the energy transition as a simple substitution problem. If it were that easy, falling costs would have solved it by now. In reality, it is a wicked problem where infrastructure, markets, regulations, and human behavior are tied together. The energy system is closer to a living ecosystem: you change one variable, and three others shift in ways nobody modeled. I experienced this firsthand introducing data platforms to heavy-steel shipyards along the coast. Introducing a new data platform doesn't just change information flow. It changes who holds power, who feels competent, and who feels threatened. The energy transition multiplies this effect by orders of magnitude.



In his book *Energy Transitions*, Vaclav Smil points out that previous shifts took generations. Moving from wood to coal required roughly 60 years. We are trying to achieve our shift within a single generation. When I look at the data, we are currently adding clean energy on top of existing fossil energy rather than actually replacing it. Recognizing this reality isn't pessimism. It is the starting point for honest planning.

Admitting the system is harder to control than we assumed takes courage. I have sat in enough strategy meetings to know what happens when someone finally says, "This is harder than we thought." The instinct is to protect the narrative. But successful projects are the ones where someone was honest early enough for the team to adapt. That requires leaders willing to say uncomfortable things in rooms where comfort is the default currency.

The transition is ultimately about people. I see this in Norway's offshore sector, where engineers who have spent twenty years drilling the freezing North Sea face genuine uncertainty about whether their skills transfer to wind or hydrogen. Norway is simultaneously a major fossil fuel exporter and an aspiring climate leader, a contradiction I navigate daily. The petroleum sector employs over a hundred thousand people and funds our welfare state. Even so, credible forecasts show demand for our products declining. The question is not whether this decline happens, but whether we build a replacement before it arrives.

Navigating uncertainty

Columbia's Jason Bordoff warns that the road to net zero will include setbacks. Like most people, I prefer certainty, but certainty isn't coming. I catch myself wanting more data before committing. When the path is unclear, the leader who acts shapes the outcome; the leader who waits gets shaped by it. Climate scientist Kate Marvel puts it best: "We need courage, not hope." Hope can be passive. The optimist assumes it will be fine and does nothing. The pessimist asks "what is the point?" and does nothing. In the end, both end up in the exact same place.

Courage means acting without a guaranteed outcome. In robotics, "acting under uncertainty" means making decisions using incomplete sensor data and imperfect models. A robot cannot wait for perfect information. This is the exact mental model required for the energy transition. We will never have enough data to feel confident. The question is whether we act anyway, knowing we must course-correct. Waiting is the greater risk. A transition of this scale borders on the impossible. That very difficulty makes it compelling. We must attempt it, because the possibility still exists.



The courage for openness

Energy planning often happens behind closed doors. Utilities and oil majors guard long-term scenarios like proprietary assets, which blocks collective learning. These proprietary models merely protect companies from being wrong in public. Surrendering that shield takes profound courage. Exposing the logic means inviting scrutiny and risking failure in plain sight. But the energy transition demands exactly this vulnerability. Leading companies will willingly show their work. Peer review makes systems stronger. It is true for code, engineering, and energy strategy alike. In industrial automation, open protocols replaced proprietary systems that created isolated data islands. The energy sector faces the exact same problem: closed models create islands of strategy. Openness is not generosity. It is critical infrastructure.

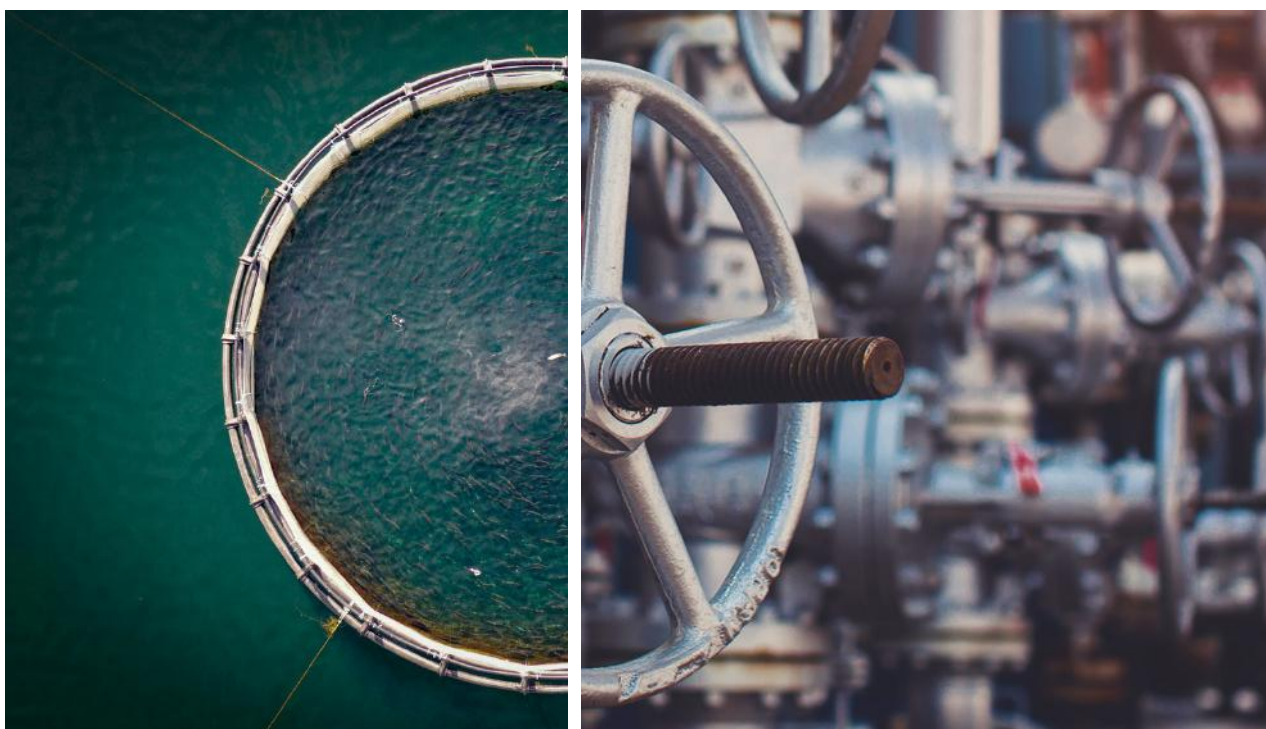


Where I might be wrong

You could argue that emphasizing courage distracts from policy, and that with a proper carbon price, companies would simply follow incentives. But someone still has to make the first move, and that requires something beyond calculation. My own projects give me pause here: most digital transformations fail not because of technology, but due to people, resistance to change, and leadership failures. Why would the energy transition, far larger and more politically contested, be any different? It won't be, unless we take the human dimension seriously.

Courage is the missing variable in most transition models. Courage alone isn't sufficient, but it is necessary and underrated. I write this with skin in the game: my coming choices will either contribute to the transition or slow it down. Analyzing courage from a safe distance would be easier, but the transition doesn't need more observers. It needs participants willing to act before the path is clear. The hardest form of courage is what Roman Krznaric calls "cathedral thinking": investing in infrastructure that won't return value until 2050 or later.

I don't want to end on a neat cliché, as that would feel false to the uncertainty I have emphasized. We can make good decisions, but we will need to practice courage repeatedly, even when it does not come naturally. In Norway, industries historically learn from each other: shipping learned from fisheries, oil and gas learned from shipping, and now offshore wind and hydrogen can learn from oil and gas.



We are not starting from scratch. But the willingness to apply past lessons to unproven, uncertain frontiers does not transfer automatically. The technology is ready. The data is as good as it will ever be. All that remains is the willingness to press start before we feel completely safe. That willingness is courage. It is not a personality trait. It is a practice.

The energy transition needs to happen from within



Marie Høie Stragiotti

Organisation & Change Lead, Vår Energi

I believe that the most important talent question in the energy sector right now isn't who we are bringing in. It's what we are doing with the people who are already here.

In most organisations, the honest answer is: not enough.

Most talent discussions tend to circle around themes related to: How do we recruit enough top external talent? How do we appeal to younger generations of employees?

These are legitimate questions. But they can also become a distraction, because they keep our focus on who we might get, instead of what we are doing with who we already have.

External hires will only ever cover small parts of the new competence required. The people who will truly determine whether we succeed through the energy transition are, in fact, largely already here.

So instead of asking whether we have, or how we can attract, the right people, we should be asking: Are we creating the right conditions for our employees to grow into who the industry needs them to be?



Combining experience with fresh thinking

If the energy transition is going to be driven from within, this is where it starts: in the powerful combination of deep expertise built over decades, and fresh thinking arriving with new talent.



Experienced professionals know how things actually work. They have seen projects fail, markets collapse, and assumptions break down. They understand the operational realities that never make it into strategy presentations.

Newer professionals bring something equally valuable. Digital fluency. Modern problem-solving approaches. Cross-disciplinary perspectives. And often, a willingness to question how things have always been done. This combination is exactly what navigating the energy transition requires.

So why does it not happen more consistently?

When organisations absorb potential instead of unleashing it

Organisations have a gravitational pull. Culture shapes behaviour at every level: what gets rewarded, what gets tolerated, and what quietly gets discouraged.

When people arrive with energy and fresh perspectives, that is an asset. But without deliberate effort, organisations rarely change to meet new people. New people change to fit the organisation, and the edge they bring is gradually smoothed away.

At the same time, the pace of technological and organisational change means that standing still is no longer an option. Roles that existed five years ago already look very different today.

Many experienced professionals are actively adapting, and becoming more valuable as a result. Others are not being given the conditions to do so, and the gap quietly grows wider.



This raises a question: Are we actively enabling development, or are we simply assuming that it will take care of itself?

Differences as a source of strength

The energy industry is facing some of the most complex and consequential challenges in the world. The energy transition is not a threat to meaningful work, it is an explosion of it.

The real value emerges when strengths are combined:

- An engineer who understands how a system behaves in the field, working alongside an analyst who can model and optimise it at scale.
- A commercial leader who has navigated multiple commodity cycles, paired with a strategist mapping the next decade of policy and regulation.
- Operational experience blended with digital and analytical capability.

Cross-functional and cross-generational collaboration is where the hardest problems are solved. But it does not happen automatically. It has to be actively designed and facilitated, or else we leave our most valuable capability unused.

The goal is not to choose between experience and new thinking. It is to build organisations where both continue to develop, and where differences become a source of strength rather than friction.

What this actually requires

This is less about launching new initiatives and more about what leaders choose to prioritise every day. It means making development a continuous leadership conversation. Not once a year, but all the time. Where is this person growing? Where are they stuck? What would help them move forward?



It means actively protecting new perspectives. When people join with an instinct to question and challenge, that is not resistance — it is value. The question is whether the organisation is strong enough to welcome it. It means building bridges deliberately. The most valuable learning flows in both directions. Cross-functional and cross-generational collaboration should be built into how work gets done, not left to coincidence.

And it means rewarding curiosity and growth, not only predictable delivery. If the people who consistently advance are those who stayed safely within their lane, that is the signal the organisation is sending, regardless of what the strategy document says.

The real workforce advantage

I am positive that the energy industry has the technical depth and intellectual capacity to lead through whatever comes next.

However, it will not come for free. It will require organisations where development is expected at every level, where new thinking doesn't get absorbed into old culture but challenges and strengthens it, and where the distance between those who have been here the longest and those who arrived most recently is actively bridged rather than quietly widened. I would argue that the people we need are largely already here. The question now is what we are doing with them.



The part we play

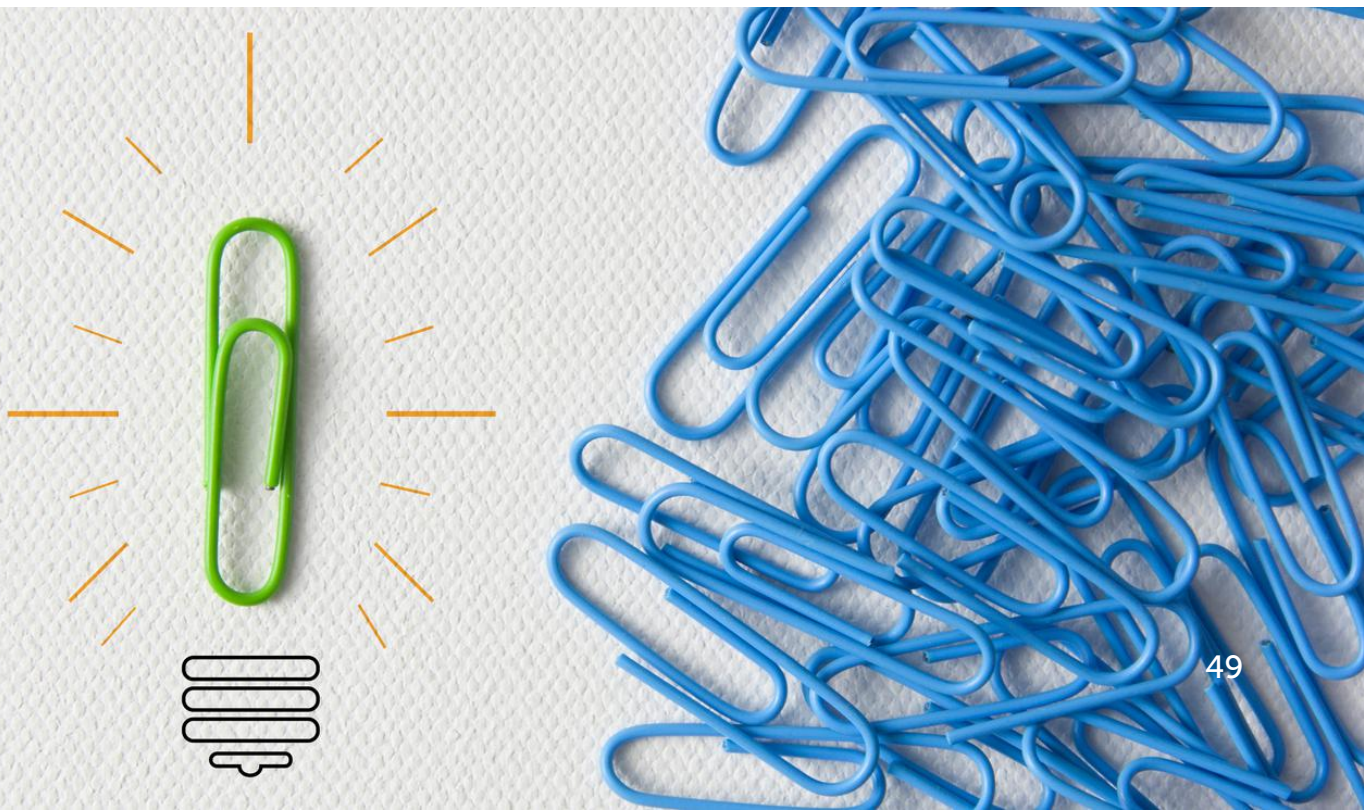


Vittoria Camodeca

Head of Commercial Negotiations, Eni CCUS Holding Ltd

Governments and corporations drive the energy transition through policy, capital, and technology. But if we frame decarbonization as a task for states and big players alone, we overlook a crucial lever: the everyday decisions of millions of people, whose habits shape demand, build legitimacy, and ultimately determine the pace of change.

It was the winter of 2015, while pursuing a Master's degree in Energy and Environmental Management and Economics, that a turning point for global climate action entered the world stage: for the first time, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) became part of the global agenda. What fascinated me then, and has stayed with me ever since, was a question no textbook quite answered: if governments set the targets and corporations deploy the capital, where does the individual fit in?



Individual choices still matter

To understand why individuals matter, it helps to first understand where they are absent. Nationally Determined Contributions are the national climate plans through which countries commit to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate impacts. Once emission targets are established, governments translate them into action through concrete instruments: binding regulations, carbon pricing, subsidies for emerging technologies, and sector-specific policy packages. These are the tools through which states operationalize their climate pledges.

Yet they share a common blind spot: they operate at society-wide level, adjusting prices, standards, redirecting investment. None of them acts directly on individual choice, and yet individual choice is precisely where so much of the story unfolds.

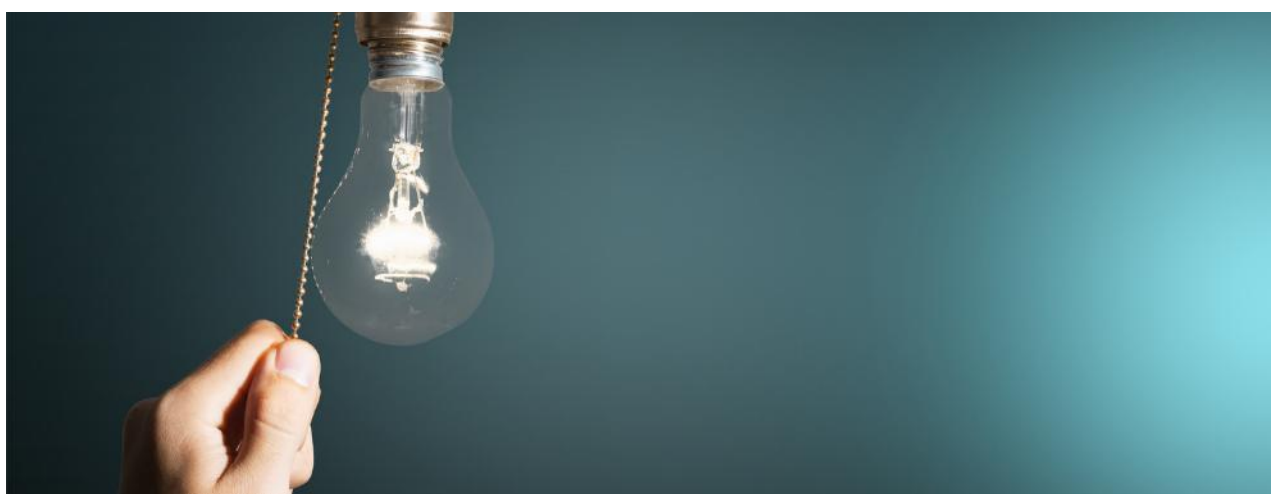
People become invisible in the NDC framework. The shift to a sustainable future is consistently framed as a story of technological progress and economic viability, not of human behaviour. Individuals appear only as a downstream effect, through taxes, energy bills, or costs passed along supply chains. But what if our daily decisions were not a footnote, but a meaningful part of the outcome?

Thirty passengers. One hundred-eighty seats. One question.

A few months ago, I flew for work between two European capitals, a two-hour journey on a Wednesday morning. On the 8 a.m. service, one of three scheduled that day, there were roughly 30 passengers on a 180-seat aircraft. I was one of them, and I had not given it a second thought. Yet the energy consumed per passenger on a near-empty plane is dramatically higher than on a full one. The question surfaced quietly but clearly: was that trip genuinely justified? And if there had been only one flight that day instead of three, would it really have derailed my work or would I simply have planned around it? Almost certainly the latter.



This is not an isolated case. Emissions are woven into nearly every aspect of our lives: what we buy, what we eat, how we travel, what we consume. Our behaviours shape energy demand in ways no policy instrument fully captures. The answer is not to retreat from modern life, but to build a more conscious relationship with the energy we use. Growth and responsibility are not opposites, but they do require us to resist the quiet temptation of becoming, quite simply, spoiled by energy. That question, whether a choice was genuinely justified, is one we rarely stop to ask. Asking it honestly, and acting on the answer, is precisely the kind of courage the transition requires of us.



Two scales, one transition

Responsibility for the transition is structural: it sits with governments, regulators, and institutions. But it is also, inescapably, personal. And crucially, these two dimensions are not independent. Individual choices shape the environment in which policy is formed: policy in turn shapes the conditions under which individuals choose. Each scale feeds the other.

We must resist the temptation of sheltering behind the supply side, or placing all accountability at the door of corporations and governments. Turning the lens on ourselves is not comfortable. It means accepting that we are not only beneficiaries of the transition, but agents of it. The transition requires courage at every level. And each of us must be willing to look honestly at the part we play, not through grand gestures, but through honest reckonings, repeated daily. The transition will move at the speed that each of us decides to give it.

Let's be honest about leadership



Kristian Omdahl

Project Manager, Norwegian Offshore Directorate
(Sokkeldirektoratet)

How do you react when faced with uncertainty? I've learned that my first instinct is often to reach for control. However, I've come to realise that another perspective is much more effective. My secret is facing uncertainty with openness. Replace control with a clear mission and then build an environment where people can speak honestly, ask for help, and learn fast.

Why I choose leadership over management:

This perspective is precisely why I believe leadership is no longer synonymous with management. I still value management deeply – it organizes work, creates structure, and ensures delivery. But true leadership does something different. To me, management coordinates tasks whereas leadership orients people. Management keeps us moving; leadership keeps us moving in the right direction, especially when the path is unclear.

In many of the organizations I've had the privilege to work in, management practices and control mechanisms are well established. We measure, report, optimize, and follow up. Those tools are necessary – particularly in complex, high-stakes environments. But I've also seen how quickly they fall short when the real need is not more control, but more orientation: What matters most right now? What do we protect? What do we change? What do we learn?



I've felt that tension personally. I've caught myself trying to manage my way toward a specific outcome – convinced I knew exactly what result was needed. Inevitably, that approach pulls me down into detail: more checkpoints, more questions, more oversight. It's rarely about mistrust in others; it's usually about my own discomfort with uncertainty.

Over time, I've learned that this is exactly where courage for openness begins. Leaders who rely only on management tools often respond to ambiguity by tightening control. But true leadership asks for the opposite: the willingness to lead without pretending the future is fully knowable. When I stop trying to eliminate uncertainty, something shifts. I can lift my eyes from the details and focus on what creates stability over time: mission, priorities, and a way of working that builds trust instead of fear.



Why we must protect the work environment

In my view, it's with the mission true leadership takes form. It isn't a plan. It sets the conditions that make good judgment more likely. The mission comes alive when priorities are clear enough to guide decisions and when trust is built into how we work. The point isn't to remove accountability. The point is to create enough clarity and safety that people can act with autonomy because they understand the direction and the guardrails.

And this is where the argument moves from leadership philosophy to leadership practice. Mission can only create autonomy if trust is high. Autonomy depends on people being able to tell the truth early – about uncertainty, risks, and when they need support. If honesty is expensive, people don't become more independent; they become more cautious. They wait. They conceal. They protect themselves. That's how organisations lose speed and learning capacity in the very moments they need it most.



In my experience, traditional management environments can unintentionally signal that asking for help is the same as admitting you're not meeting the expected standard. The messages are rarely explicit, but the culture speaks through phrases like: "Figure it out," "Come when you have a solution," or "We tried that before." These aren't always said with bad intent, but the effect is consistent: learning gets punished, concealment gets rewarded, and good ideas stay unsaid.

I've realised that this pattern endures not because leaders intend for good ideas to be overlooked, but because the way leadership is practised has just as much impact as the words leaders use. Many leaders genuinely believe they are approachable. But approachability isn't the same as accessibility. People watch reactions closely. They don't ask for help because they've been told they can; they ask because they've seen that it's safe – because they've seen what happens to someone else who did it first.

When I ask myself how to engineer an environment where trust is real and asking for help feels natural, I come back to one uncomfortable truth: the work environment is not something that emerges on its own. It is something I'm responsible for maintaining.

Three things I've learned:

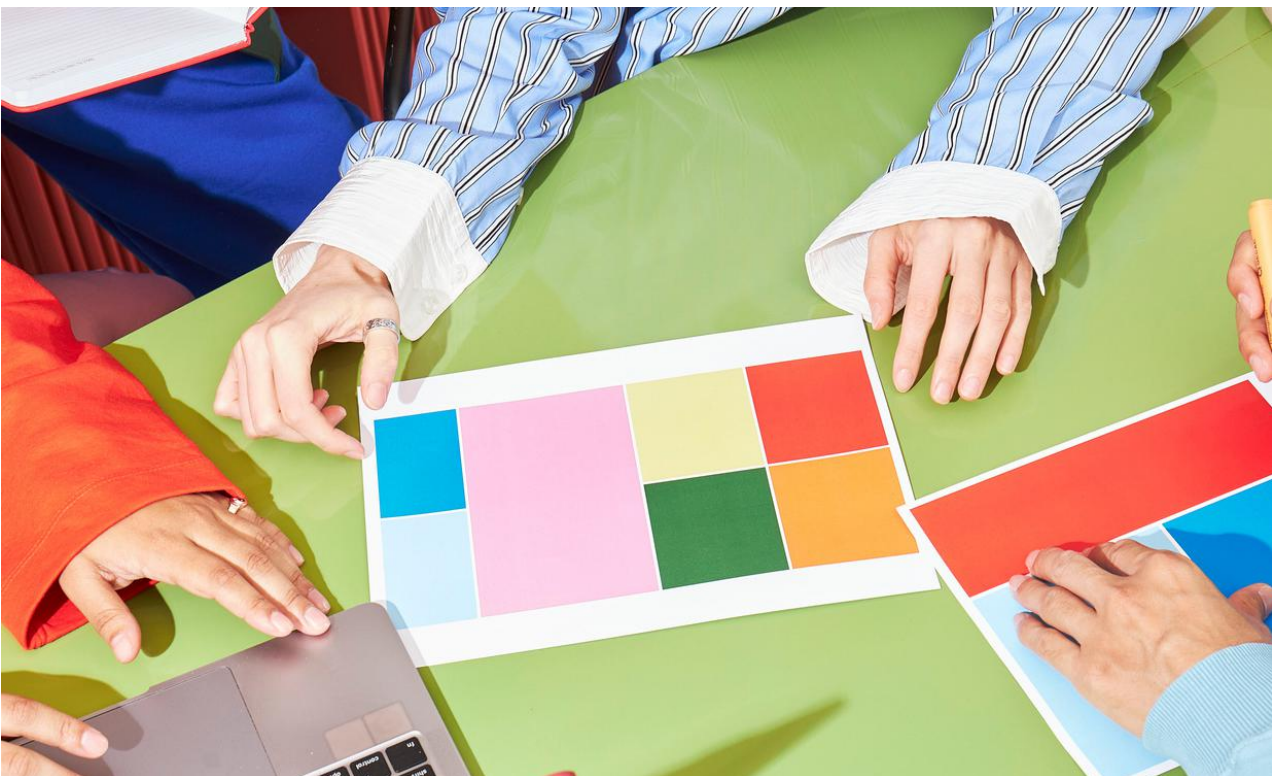
First, trust must be actively protected. Left unattended, it rarely collapses due to external pressure alone. It breaks down because of small internal signals that go unaddressed: credit being quietly claimed by the loudest voice, mistakes met with blame instead of learning, meetings where silence feels safer than contribution. I've come to see it as my role to be explicit about what I will not accept – and to act when those lines are crossed. Not to control people, but to protect the space they work in. When fairness is defended consistently, people stop watching their backs and start focusing outward, on the mission we share.

The second thing I've learned is that I set the price of honesty, whether I intend to or not. People constantly assess the risk of speaking openly: What happens if I admit uncertainty? What happens if I say I'm stuck? What happens if I ask for help? If I want openness from others, I must be willing to show it myself – without hesitation and without apology.



I've found that simply stating when I'm unsure changes the tone in the room. Acknowledging a decision, I made that turned out wrong builds more trust than trying to defend it. Each time I do this, the social cost of honesty drops. Over time, honesty becomes a habit rather than a risk.

The third thing I've learned is that culture is shaped less by what we say than by what we reinforce. Behaviours that are recognized get repeated – whether we mean to or not. For me, this has meant becoming more deliberate about separating behaviour from results. Strong results can sometimes be achieved through unhealthy behaviour – but often at a high cost to the work environment. When that behaviour is rewarded, even indirectly, it spreads.



On the other hand, when constructive behaviour is recognized – even when outcomes aren't perfect – it builds something far more durable. Good behaviour compounds. It strengthens learning, reduces friction, and increases trust over time. And in the long run, that is where sustainable performance comes from.

In the end, true leadership is not something I “communicate” – it’s something I practice, especially when my instinct is to tighten control. It’s choosing clarity over certainty and building an environment strong enough to carry the mission through ambiguity.



For me, that means protecting the environment from the internal threats that make people cautious, setting a low price for honesty by modelling it myself, and reinforcing the behaviours that keep trust intact even when results are under pressure. Because when people can speak up early, ask for help, and challenge assumptions without fear, the organization doesn’t slow down, it gets smarter. And in a time where complexity is the norm and the mission demands both reliability and change, that kind of trust isn’t a “nice to have.” It’s the infrastructure that makes leadership possible.

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