

THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH SILVIA CALANDRELLI



Introduction

With a degree in Philosophy and a deep-rooted passion for culture and innovation, Silvia began her professional journey at the Italian state broadcaster (RAI) in 1989, contributing first to radio and then to television. Over the years, she has held strategic roles that have shaped the evolution of public broadcasting in Italy, combining editorial vision with technological foresight.

Her leadership in digital transformation began in 2000, when she was appointed Head of Entertainment Contents at Rai Net. She later became Deputy Director of New Media and Board Member of RAI Net, where she played a key role in developing RAI's digital offer and expanding its online presence.

Silvia's career continued with high-level editorial and managerial responsibilities: Deputy Director of Rai 3, Director of Rai Educational, and later Director of Rai Cultura. In this role, she oversaw a wide and diverse portfolio including Rai Scuola, Rai Storia, Rai 5, the National Symphony Orchestra, and productions of drama and classical music for generalist channels—demonstrating her ability to integrate cultural depth with audience engagement.

In 2021 Silvia was appointed Director for Culture and Educational, further consolidating her commitment to public service broadcasting with a strong educational and cultural mission.

Her governance experience includes serving on the Board of Rai Com until 2023 and currently as a Board Member of the Bargello Museums, reflecting her ongoing dedication to Italy's cultural heritage.

In May 2025, she embraced a new strategic challenge as Director of Rai's Department for Sustainability – ESG, where she leads the company's efforts in environmental, social, and governance initiatives. She also coordinates Rai's corporate task force on Artificial Intelligence, guiding ethical and innovative approaches to AI integration in media.

Alongside her executive roles, she has contributed to academic life through teaching engagements at La Sapienza University and Tor Vergata University, sharing her expertise in communication, media economics, and cultural management.

Her career reflects a unique blend of editorial leadership, digital innovation, cultural stewardship, and strategic vision in ESG and AI—making her a key figure in shaping the future of public media.

Can you share some insights into your journey and the key factors that have contributed to your success?

Certainly, many factors have contributed to my journey. If I had to summarize the two most important ones that have defined my professional path, they would be determination and passion. The driving force behind everything in my life - from my studies to my professional path and career - has undoubtedly been a profound passion, a deep love for my work, and a strong determination, without which I would not have achieved the goals I have reached. Even today, I consider work to be a fundamental element and foundation not only of my identity but also of people's identities. I believe that our lives - alongside relationships, emotions, and dialogue with others - reserve a significant place for our work. This space must be built with great care and attention, because only work that is loved, lived with passion, and pursued with determination toward one's goals can truly complete our structure and identity each one of us.

As for insights, I can say that I have always listened to myself. To listen to oneself means having the ability to understand what one wants to pursue - and to understand it early enough. I already knew during my studies, primarily routed in philosophy, what I wanted to achieve: I wanted to create something that would serve everyone, to be shared with all, and to become a collective heritage. This was only possible because of my ability to listen to myself, a skill I developed, worked on, and committed to, because it is not something given to us by nature. Ultimately, listening to oneself means not being influenced by family expectations or societal conditioning. I come from a family that certainly would have preferred I studied medicine, but I listened to that inner voice that revealed my true desires. Regarding societal conditioning, being a woman was, and still is, a factor that can limit professional growth and career advancement. However, this never influenced me; I moved forward knowing that I had to build my own path. Only if you had vision you could succeed, otherwise stereotypes would impede you. The biggest challenge in life is to believe in yourself. I remember with clarity if I listened to the prejudice, it would limit me and my possibilities. I also learned not to let it get under my skin.

How do you define leadership, and what qualities do you believe are essential for effective leadership in any field?

A leader is not someone who simply applies a linear managerial approach; rather, a leader is someone who understands that human knowledge must be reassembled in dialogue between different perspectives, who can navigate multiple dimensions of reality, create connections between events, facts, and relationships, and move within complexity. We are moving toward an increasingly hyperconnected world where linear approaches are no longer viable. A leader must have the ability to create connections between people, disciplines, and issues.

Therefore, beyond determination and vision, a leader must be able to read complexity. This is an extremely important feature: it means knowing how to bring different types of knowledge into relation, combining mental skills that allow for advanced action, and understanding diverse realities. The rigid, linear models of the past no longer suffice; we must be able to read what is happening in a constantly changing world. Knowledge is no longer something one acquires and remains unchanged, as it might have been in the past; it is constantly evolving, and skills must be continuously updated. Reading complexity means being able to govern the present while imagining and building the future.

Another essential quality, in my view, is vision. Being a good manager is not enough to be a leader. I believe leaders are those with a vision who then use their managerial skills to make that vision a reality. Intuition (often a natural gift) and listening skills, which must be developed, are also crucial. A leader is never alone; they are like a conductor who must harmonize all sections of the orchestra - the working teams. Only by developing the ability to listen to the needs of the team, not only to manage conflicts or negotiate in difficult situations, but also because listening can generate new insights, can a leader be truly credible, strong, and authoritative. This has been a mantra in my own leadership journey, and all great leaders share it: leadership is never solitary; the leader brings the vision, but it is the articulation of listening that makes them effective.

“We are moving toward an increasingly hyperconnected world where linear approaches are no longer viable”

Can you share a specific challenge or obstacle you encountered in your career? How did you address it, and what lessons did you learn that can be applicable to other leaders?

The greatest challenge in my career was undoubtedly the transformation of Rai Educational into Rai Cultura. Starting from Rai Educational - a department primarily focused on school-related content - we created Rai Cultura, a Rai division encompassing multiple elements: the National Symphony Orchestra, specialized cultural channels, and generalist cultural offerings.

The challenge was to create a division that would become a hub for cultural dissemination, the creation of cultural content, and the availability of knowledge to all citizens. The most important lesson I learned, and one I believe applies to everyone, is to trust yourself and listen deeply to your team. Determination is necessary, of course, and from the start, despite the difficulties, I was crystal clear about my goal. But it was more than a career or professional objective: it was a mission. I realized that to achieve it, I had to focus entirely on listening to myself and my team.

So my advice is: always be determined, always listen to yourself, and never allow distractions to sway you. Passion, determination, authority, and strength are crucial, especially in moments of discouragement - because there will be days when things do not go well. In this, my sporting spirit helped me greatly. Even setbacks and defeats can be valuable tools for getting back up and starting again, provided you remain clear on the ultimate goal.

How do you maintain resilience and motivation during difficult times, and what strategies have helped you overcome obstacles?

You overcome challenges by staying focused, avoiding distractions, and distancing yourself from emotional reactions, which can sometimes negatively affect decision-making.

For me, sport has been essential in developing resilience. I have always been a swimmer, with a deep passion for swimming. Alongside my connection to nature and beauty, it has been a fundamental tool for facing difficult times.

When I need to make important decisions, I go swimming. It is my place of concentration (no ringing phones, no computers) deeply in a space that, in a way, offers “weightlessness.” The very act of swimming requires focus, and this practice has taught me a great deal.

Similarly, my contact with nature plays an essential role: I love walking outdoors, surrounded by greenery. In challenging moments, I sometimes choose instead to take refuge in the beauty of art: my favorite museum is the Galleria Borghese, where I can lose myself in front of a Caravaggio or a Titian. Whether through sport, nature, or art, these are experiences that allow me to disconnect from the present and immerse myself in something larger. That is where I recover all my energy - creative, personal, and emotional.

What initiatives or strategies do you implement to promote diversity and inclusion within the world of media and communication?

Diversity and inclusion are fundamental not only in media and communication but in all areas, because differences create richness. For this reason, throughout my professional work, I have always promoted the practice of inclusion.

Inclusion means not only integrating people into work teams but also reaching audiences with content and messages that speak to everyone. Earlier, we discussed the importance of disseminating knowledge: my focus has always been on offering culture and information to all citizens.

During the pandemic, for example, in the division I directed, we produced a vast amount of content for schools, universities, and scientific dissemination, at a time when the country was shut down and schools, museums, and universities were inaccessible. We realized that not everyone had access to devices or digital tools, and it became essential to ensure that knowledge remained a public good, accessible to all, without exclusion.

I believe diversity and inclusion only have value if we are open and willing to engage in dialogue. In a team, as in cultural production and content creation, these dimensions bring richness.

Another central point for me has always been meritocracy: recognizing and valuing skills - both female and male - based solely on merit and the quality of work. I have never

selected anyone except based on their competence and the value they could bring to the project.

In the workplace the masculine approach was often in my experience one that had a lack of support and faith in women because of stereotypical approaches. This was also a way to exclude women or limit women in reaching their achievements.

Women are seen as not being able to 'have it all' and be a good mother and leader at the same time. I learned this early on in my career.

There is still a long road to take to overcome female prejudice. Prejudice seems to be deeply embedded in Italian culture. I do not want to generalize but this is the case.

Women and men have to combat this approach together. For this reason, the journey women must take is a long one.

It is important, every day, in every action to affirm the value of women, as the journey is a long one. We need men and women to take action together.

“I believe diversity and inclusion only have value if we are open and willing to engage in dialogue.”

NEW – AI: Opportunities and threats for the new generations

The capabilities of generative artificial intelligence, and now also of “agentic” AI, are extraordinary. They can facilitate our work in terms of data analysis and processing, delivering information in record time. It is undoubtedly a powerful and increasingly indispensable tool, but it requires knowledge, study, and in-depth analysis.

It can become a valuable ally, able to support and enhance our activities; but if we are unable to govern it, we risk being governed by it. AI is extremely seductive: it has a playful side, an entertainment dimension, and, of course, enormous professional potential.

My advice to younger generations is to study it: do not see it merely as a help or an “accessory,” but treat it as a complementary tool. If you see it this way, it will no longer be a threat. Take, for example, the role of a business analyst: it is not disappearing but

evolving. Analysts will need to learn how to process data in new ways, leveraging AI's capabilities without fully delegating the decision-making process.

AI can process data far faster and in greater depth than a human, but interpretation and—most importantly—the final decision must remain human. This is a crucial point: technology can simplify and accelerate, but it must not replace our critical capacity.

We are speaking of a vast opportunity—provided we invest time and develop the right skills. The intellectual and conceptual toolkit of yesterday is no longer enough. Developing and analyzing data today means working in a completely different context, and we must be aware of that. Like any technology, AI must remain at our service. If we govern it, it will be an invaluable resource; if we submit to it passively, it risks becoming a threat.

“My advice to younger generations is to study it [AI]: do not see it merely as a help or an “accessory,” but treat it as a complementary tool.”

As a role model, what advice would you give to aspiring young leaders who aim to have a positive impact in their respective fields?

Always strive to make a difference. Do not limit yourself to managing the status quo—that is something any manager can do. A leader, instead, is someone who makes a difference. Every day, in your work, at any professional level, making a difference and building something unique is what makes your leadership distinctive and unrepeatable.

Reflections

Silvia Calandrelli's journey exemplifies visionary and authentic leadership. Her blend of editorial excellence, digital innovation, and commitment to public service is an inspiration for leaders to embrace complexity, champion inclusion, and evolve with purpose—ensuring both technology and human values shape the future.

Silvia's call to braveness in embracing change becomes especially relevant in the current season of technological and geopolitical acceleration, when one core talent for leaders is the capacity of facing the unknown with open-mindedness and adaptability; notably, her background in humanities has allowed her to master a space traditionally reserved to STEM profiles. Food for thoughts...

Silvia Calandrelli was interviewed by Ilaria Bertizzolo, Consultant at Eric Salmon & Partners.



We are proud
to be B Corp
certified.

