

THE VOICE OF FEMALE LEADERS

A CONVERSATION WITH GEORGINA GRENON



Introduction

Georgina Grenon has built a career at the intersection of industry, international strategy consulting, public service, and large-scale transformation, with a clear specialization that has matured into a personal mission: sustainability.

Trained as a chemical engineer and later an INSEAD MBA, she has moved fluently between the technical and the business worlds—often insisting that the true challenge is not choosing one side but making the two work together: ‘more responsible’ and ‘more profitable’ must not be opposites.

From 2018 to 2024, she served as Sustainability Director (Director Environmental Excellence) for Paris 2024, embedding sustainability into the operating model of one of the most visible projects on the planet. Today, as an independent executive advisor, she supports organizations and senior leaders on their sustainability journeys, while also contributing to governance through multiple non-executive roles.

In this conversation, Georgina reflects on the moment her sustainability compass became explicit, why she believes leaders must hold both rigor and imagination, how Paris 2024 became a real-world laboratory, and what it means to bring that experience into boardrooms—where the right questions matter as much as the right answers.

The Connecting Thread Across a Multi-Sector Career

What is the common thread running through your career—across industry, consulting, public policy, innovation, and sport?

A thread became clearer over time. Early in my career, it wasn't as explicit. But in the last +20 years, it's definitely sustainability—and it's not accidental. It's the result of a

“Sustainability became the common thread—because it was a conscious decision I made, rooted in what I promised my children.”

conscious decision to focus my career on sustainability questions.

At the root of it, there's something very simple: the desire to put my competences and energy into leaving my children “a better world” . I made them that promise. And that promise gave me the strength to make choices aligned with that ambition.

Do you remember a precise moment when that decision was crystallized?

Yes—completely. It was the birth of my first daughter.

I had already been lucky in the early 2000s, as a consultant, to work on topics like renewables, energy efficiency, and even early carbon accounting and reduction methods. My main field of work at the time was energy strategy, and to me the future of energy was clearly ‘more renewables, more efficiency, and decarbonization.’

When my daughter was born, I promised her I would dedicate myself to that.

With all your experience and variety of responsibilities, is there a conviction that has never changed since the beginning?

Yes, indeed : the belief that we can change, that we can do things differently. But it requires rolling up our sleeves and accepting that we must evolve beyond what we've always known.

You have evolved from a senior consulting role to public service, what did it take to do such moves?

There were moments where decisions were difficult—like leaving a senior role in a global consulting firm to become, essentially, a civil servant in the French Ministry of Ecology and Energy. That can look like a brutal move. But at that time it was exactly what I needed: to put what I had learned in the private sector at the service of the public interest, and to learn how public policy actually works from the inside, how you activate levers for change in regulated markets like energy.

Since then, I often advise people to spend time on both sides. It gives you a richer, more complete view of how change can effectively be championed.

How has your ‘dual formation’ (Engineering & MBA) shaped your way of deciding and convincing?

Engineering gives you rigor, an analytical discipline, a structured way to ask questions and understand systems. In my case, chemistry has been surprisingly useful even decades later, for example in circular economy work.

The MBA adds the business lens. And for me, the combination is powerful because you can speak technical and you can speak business, and you stop separating them. The goal was always to be more responsible while remaining profitable, and that is still my core proposition today.

Paris 2024 - A Real-World Laboratory for Sustainability

Paris 2024 has been known as a tremendous success in its approach for sustainability thanks to your leadership. What made Paris 2024 a ‘real-world laboratory’ for sustainability?

First of all, it was a true team effort. From the top of the organization to the +40k volunteers and +200k suppliers, to obtain such results required everyone’s contributions. We tried to show that when you design an organization differently I mean, when you embed principles into the DNA and build the processes accordingly, then you can deliver something significantly more responsible and still profitable. Paris 2024 has become a

kind of case study. Researchers are now studying how we achieved it because it really was a laboratory: in less than six years, a huge number of things happened, and all under intense scrutiny. And we proved you can align a mega-event with the Paris Agreement, halve emissions, compensate the remainder, and massively increase circularity beyond 90%, while preserving the nature of the venues, and even enhancing it, the historic clean up of the Seine by the City of Paris and the French State remains a permanent legacy for all.

When you think of Paris 2024, what are you most proud of?

It's not a specific technological innovation. It's the people, the human journey. What we achieved, we achieved collectively, from the very top to interns who brought ideas that made real differences, often with limited means.

I was part of an extraordinary leadership team, and I had an extraordinary team: not very big but engaged, ready to give everything, and deeply committed to collective success. And what makes me proud is that people held on: it wasn't easy, and yet nobody left the ship. The team grew slowly over the years and we all left together once the Games were over, with the final report and last press conference delivered.

With the level of attention and scrutiny around such a world-class event, how did you make innovation possible while keeping risk manageable?

You can't innovate in isolation. New ideas come when you bring different forms of experience together : operations, suppliers, sponsors, NGOs.

But for innovation to happen, we had to make a conscious choice to invite it and to take risks. When you have billions of viewers, you do not want to fail publicly.

“If you do what you've always done, you get the same old results—so to change, you must dare, challenge, and measure.”

In those contexts, people tend to default to what they know works. But if you do what you've always done, you get the same old results. So to change, you must dare. Dare to propose, dare to challenge, and then you must measure to validate whether the innovation is worth it.

What does ‘decarbonizing the flame’ tell us about leadership and symbolism?

Very early, the idea was to find an image that would help the world understand our commitment to climate and environment. The flame is one of the oldest Olympic symbols. Decarbonizing is a strong signal: there are no sacred cows. We can keep symbols, but we must adapt them because times demand it.

Technically, the electric flame enabled design choices that would be impossible with a real fire, so sustainability sparked creativity, and design, engineering and safety came together.

Today you are an independent executive advisor. How do you leverage more than 30 years of experience, and especially that of Paris 2024?

Today, with my company Geovival, I help organizations transform for real. People say sustainability is “less fashionable” now, but that’s just the surface. The truth is that most organizations are still moving, especially the ones that have found real business value in doing things differently. Paris 2024 helps because everyone saw the results: a massive, complex, global event proving that sustainability isn’t a theory. It works. It scales. It delivers...

But my clients aren’t looking for a replay of the Games; they’re focused on their own trajectory and their own results. They want to understand how they can change, with their constraints and ambitions, and they look for someone who can bring clarity and structure to that journey. What they seek is a guide, a sparring partner who has already navigated high-stakes performance and delivered. In the end, they want their own medal, and they turn to someone who knows what it takes to get there.

Governance: Seeing Blind Spots, Asking Better Questions

When you think about your executive career, what do you take as learnings to your roles in governance today?

A board is a different animal. You need to keep distance from the executive reflex. You must let management do their job.

A board is there to serve the shareholders' mandate, but also to bring external perspective. In my case, my role is to bring an external view, including environmental and social responsibility, and to help management gain time by pointing out blind spots. Diversity matters—gender, origins, education, and trajectories—because the more diverse the board, the fewer blind spots you carry into decisions.

What question should board members ask themselves more often?

A simple one: 'For whom am I working?' Why am I here? What is expected of me? These are fundamental governance questions. Your role is to help the organization move

“Boards should ask more often: ‘For whom am I working? Why am I here? What is expected of me?’”.

forward, ensure relevance in changing times, and serve the mandate.

As a whole, ensuring its resilience and adaptability in a rapidly changing world. If you disagree fundamentally, it might simply not be the right board for you.

Research, AI, and Leadership

Why did you choose to contribute to research at INSEAD, and what are you working on?

It is an honor to have received such invitation from INSEAD. The Executive-in-Residence role is voluntary and unpaid. The idea is to support researchers by sharing real-world experience so they can incorporate it into teaching and frameworks.

Currently, I work on two different subjects: one is capturing the Paris 2024 experience and how it can serve other organizations and industries. The second is a very new field: how AI can help in making products and systems more responsible. INSEAD is very strong on sustainability and on AI-driven transformation, and beyond MBAs, their executive education programs are sold out well in advance.

From your experience, what would you say, leadership traits mattered most under extreme pressure?

Trust. A few months before the Games, I ran my last seminar with my team, and I decided to center it on trust. The reason is simple yet sometimes overlooked by leaders: when the moment comes, when it's "show time", you need teams to be ready to perform at their best level, and you need to trust them... and you also need them to trust you. No time for questioning, for challenges, solutions have to be found and delivered fast. As a leader, you need to trust the judgment and resolution capacity of your team on the ground. For the games, we were serving more than 40 venues at the same time with a very small team in close to 24/7 operations!

Trust makes everything faster and more effective. But beyond trust, leadership begins with a vision. At Paris 2024, we simplified it to two words: 'spectacular and sustainable.' Those words constantly guided decisions—even when adversity hit.

“Trust gives wings. Under pressure, trust makes everything faster and more effective.”

What personal ‘anchors’ helped you sustain energy and clarity?

Humor was essential. You have to be serious, but you shouldn't take yourself too seriously, and at Paris 2024 we were really good at that. We were constantly making jokes, not because the work wasn't serious, but because it's the best way to release tension and build cohesion, the way surgeons crack jokes in operating rooms. Humor and *bienveillance* were part of the DNA of our Games. And of course, my real safety net was my family and closest friends; their support mattered enormously, especially during the final sprint. On a more inward note, music helped too. A high-energy playlist and my guitar were incredibly effective pressure absorbers

Finally, what advice would you give to a young leader who wants to contribute to the sustainability transition?

If you want to contribute to the sustainability transition, you have to dare, and you have to work. Good intentions don't deliver results; fundamentals do. Keep your objectives

clear, understand the system from within, and focus on the levers that genuinely shift outcomes. And remember: usually, **sustainability is a collective sport that runs at the pace of a marathon**. It demands stamina, clarity, and true teamwork to carry ambition over the long run and turn it into tangible results

Reflections

Listening to Georgina Grenon is a reminder that sustainability leadership is not a slogan, it is a discipline. Her story is built around deliberate choices: moving across sectors to understand the full system; refusing to split the technical from the commercial; and insisting that ‘responsible’ must be designed as ‘performant,’ not tolerated as ‘costly.’

What stands out is how she frames transformation as a collective craft. In her account of Paris 2024, innovation is less a miracle technology than a method: identify blockers, redesign reliability, measure outcomes, and, above all, build trust through transparency and shared ownership.

Her governance reflections are equally pragmatic. Boards matter most when they resist becoming theatres of passive reporting. Modern governance is not louder control, but better questions: agenda balance, information quality, decision robustness, and the humility to remember one’s mandate.

Finally, her ‘anchor’—humor—emerges as a tool for resilience and cohesion. Not an escape from seriousness, but a way to sustain people through pressure.

Georgina Grenon was interviewed by Jean-Etienne Boisseau, Partner at Eric Salmon & Partners



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