



Michelle Ortega: Leading with Humility in Sustainability

For Michelle Ortega, stepping into the role of Sustainability Engagement Lead at Fonterra felt like embarking on a new, uncharted path. While Michelle was well-versed in leadership, her knowledge of the sustainability sector was still growing. That's why she decided to enrol in the Sustainability Leadership Programme (SLP).

"As someone who was very new to the sustainability field, I was looking for a trusted and well-regarded course that would provide me with a foundational set of tools," Michelle explains. "I needed to better understand the sustainability landscape, not only in New Zealand but also globally. At the same time, I wanted to refine my leadership skills, as a significant part of my role involves influencing and inspiring others."

Despite her prior leadership experience, Michelle quickly realised there was more to learn than she initially

expected. "From the outset, I felt I had a better-than-average grasp on leadership, having led teams in the past," she says. "But not long into the course, I realised there was so much more I didn't know."

Her experience in the programme led to an epiphany. "They say if knowledge is power, then knowing what we don't know is wisdom," she reflects. "The SLP taught me the importance of humility and curiosity—being a lifelong learner is essential when you're working in sustainability."

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Adapting Leadership Styles for Greater Impact

The most valuable tools Michelle picked up came from a workshop which focused on leadership backbone, styles, and resilience. This workshop was instrumental in reshaping how she approached leadership, particularly when it came to understanding her own identity as a leader.

"It forced me to understand myself better and not get stuck in a single identity," she shares. "Sometimes, we think being authentic means always being our true selves in every situation, but effective leadership often requires adaptability."

Michelle learned that successful leadership wasn't just about remaining steadfast to her purpose; it was about adapting her style to meet different challenges. "Your personality matters," she says, "but your ability to adapt matters even more. Who you become isn't about the traits you have—it's about what you decide to do with them."

Translating Knowledge into Action

Since completing the programme, Michelle's confidence in her role has skyrocketed, and this newfound assurance has influenced how she interacts with her team and the wider organisation. The tools and insights she gained have helped her reframe her sustainability challenge from a simple statement into a breakthrough question: "How might we cultivate a culture that enables us to deliver on our sustainability goals and aspirations?"

This shift in thinking has allowed Michelle to focus not just on achieving targets but on building a supportive culture around sustainability at Fonterra. "You can only get so far with a focus on goals and targets," she explains. "It's when you have people behind your cause, believing in it and capable of behaving in ways that support it, that you realise the true power of culture."

Michelle's efforts have already begun to bear fruit. By connecting her team's passion to the company's broader sustainability goals, she's fostering a culture of collective responsibility—one that goes beyond individual actions and looks at the larger impact on the environment.

A Vision for the Future

Looking ahead, Michelle is excited about the possibilities that lie before her. Armed with a wealth of resources from the SLP, she plans to continue drawing from the programme as she navigates the evolving challenges of her role. "I have an entire database full of SLP readings and resources," she says, "so there's no doubt I'll be dipping into that wizard's sleeve whenever I need the best framework or activity to use."



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But for Michelle, the lessons of the SLP go beyond her current role—they've reshaped her outlook on life. "Living a fulfilled life isn't about living just for myself," she says. "It's about having a positive impact, no matter how small, on our precious planet and its future inhabitants."

As Michelle continues to lead Fonterra's sustainability efforts, her focus remains clear: to lead with humility, adaptability, and a commitment to making a meaningful impact on both her organisation and the world.



The **Sustainability Leadership Programme** is Australasia's most comprehensive course on sustainability leadership, offered in partnership with the [Sustainable Business Council](#) and [Catapult](#). This intensive short course equips leaders with the tools and confidence needed to create measurable impacts. [Find out more.](#)