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## A Year Of Business Lessons From Social Impact Leaders

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Katie Couric and Ryan Gellert speak onstage during the 2023 SXSW Conference and Festivals on March 12, 2023 in Austin, Texas. (Photo by Diego Donamaria/Getty Images for SXSW) [-] GETTY IMAGES FOR SXSW

## **A Year Of Business Lessons From Social Impact Leaders**

Over the past year, I have had the privilege of speaking with some of the most forward-thinking business and social impact leaders in the world. In the face of profound global challenges—political polarization, environmental collapse, racial injustice, and widening economic inequality—these leaders have consistently delivered one unifying message: The future belongs to businesses that solve social problems, not contribute to them. In the context of the deconstruction of social impact in the United States, I found it helpful to review what I learned over the last twelve months. I hope you'll find what these leaders shared as helpful and inspiring as I did.

### **When Progress Reverses, Business Must Lead**

We are living through a period of extraordinary social regression. From rollbacks on reproductive rights in the U.S. to the dismantling of environmental protections and the amplification of xenophobia, governments are retreating from their responsibilities to protect vulnerable communities and future generations.

As I wrote in [“Social Change Under Trump: A Playbook for Business Leaders”](#) when businesses are facing severe backlash against ESG and some have already retreated from earlier commitments to social and environmental change, CEOs need to affirm and live the institution's values.

“This is the hard part and this is what separates those who walk the talk from those who just talk the talk,” said Brent Chrite, President of Bentley University. “If you care about the environment or social justice or inclusivity, then show it. This is a critical leadership matter.”

### **Business Leadership Means Gender Equity**

The fight for gender equity in leadership is far from over. As I documented in [“Equitable Leadership: How to Get More Women Into the C-Suite”](#), only 11.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. The solution is structural overhaul of how leadership potential is recognized and cultivated.

“At Catalyst, we talk about what it will take to fix the systems when nearly 90% of CEOs are men and 70% of the C-Suite are men,” said President and CEO, Catalyst. “The first thing is a commitment to change - that doesn't have to be targets, but it does require aspirational goals that will create pathways to leadership for more women.”

(As an aside, I'd hoped to include the perspective of an experienced global human resource leader in this article, but her organization wouldn't allow her to share her view that success in this space will only happen when 50% of CEOs are women.)

### **Authentic Social Impact — Beyond Marketing**

Today, consumers and employees are smarter than ever about corporate virtue signaling. In [“Social Impact Leadership: How to Walk the Talk in 2025”](#), I heard from companies that have embedded impact into their business models, not just their marketing.

“When a company becomes legally accountable to its stakeholders — workers, communities, customers, suppliers and the environment — ‘walking the talk’ becomes a default. Our work on the B Corp Impact Assessment helped us identify our strengths and blind spots and ensured

thoroughness when looking at how we operate as a business,” said Ryan Gellert, President of Patagonia.

### **Business as a Moral Choice**

In “Business and Moral Choice: Where Do You Stand?”, I made the case that every business decision is inherently a moral decision—from who you hire, to how you source materials, to where you invest profits. And, that in the current polarized, divisive political context, making the right moral decision, means standing up for the purpose and values that underpin every progressive business. Christopher Marquis, Sinyi Professor of Chinese Management, Cambridge Judge Business School has discovered that in companies that stand for something, the stronger loyalty from people that support them, offsets those they alienate.

“In today's era, marked by the ubiquity of social media and deep political polarization, corporations find themselves in a precarious position. Avoiding politics is simply not an option. Companies must now navigate this complex and often divisive landscape, balancing their public positions with the diverse perspectives of their stakeholders. In this challenging mix, what is crucial for the company is values and authenticity, knowing what one stands for as a company and consistently expressing that is essential to navigate such situations.”

### **Climate Action Is Business Survival**

In [“6 Ways Companies Can Prepare for Climate Disasters”](#), the message was clear: climate risk is business risk. Future leaders will be those who build climate resilience into every decision.

“We must all take urgent, sustained action to reverse nature loss and emissions before we reach a tipping point from which we will not recover,” wrote Kathleen McLaughlin, Executive Vice President and Chief Sustainability Officer for Walmart, Inc. and President of the Walmart Foundation.

### **Preparing the Next Generation of Business Leaders**

In “What Does It Take to Educate the Next Generation of Leaders with Heart?”, I looked at how business schools and corporate training programs must evolve to emphasize empathy, ethics, and social responsibility alongside profit and performance.

“We need to prepare students for life in the corporate world that have a social conscience such as providing business programs that incorporate philosophy and ethics,” said Barry Craig, President of Huron University. “If we do it right, we end up with ethical students moving the corporate world towards social change.”

### **Social Impact and Profitable Business Are Indivisible**

Every article returned to one central truth: solving social problems is no longer a distraction from profit—it is a pathway to it. From climate innovation to inclusive product design, companies that center purpose in their core strategy are outpacing their competitors. In [“The New Mandate for Business: Solve Social Problems, Make a Profit”](#), I shared how a business-first approach can encourage more CEOs to help solve social problems in ways that are also good for their companies. “The days of seeing profits and purpose from separate lenses are over and institutions who are still viewing them with separate lenses will suffer,” said Faraz Khan, CEO of ESG technology and

advisory firm Spectreco. “Purpose driven organizations that prioritize communities and the planet are reaping financial rewards.”

*Paul Klein is the founder and CEO of Impakt, and a contributor to Forbes on leadership, social change, and corporate responsibility.*