

Can **Leadership** be **Sustainable?**



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As the world gradually starts to lift the restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19, many are questioning the capitalist business models that have been used to build our current society. We live in a historic moment in which business leaders can choose to return to the world of pollution and waste or they can choose to accelerate the transition to a future where profit, revenue and results are aligned to environmental and sustainability goals. And it is in these times of change that leadership and its collaborative skills are decisive.

If we are unable to protect our natural capital - the planet - there will soon be no value to capture, products to sell, or jobs to create.

It is important to mention what Sustainable Leadership means. It occurs when business leaders (usually CEOs and Board members) run their companies with the environment, society and long-term sustainability goals in mind. Referred to as the PPP (People, Planet, Profit), or the triple "last line" approach (in an allusion to the net results of the actions of the organization), a leader guided by the principles of sustainability takes into account the interests of its different stakeholders (from employees, consumers, business partners, future generations) and their shareholders.

It is about leading in a way that benefits societies and the environment, whilst maintaining financial and economic performance. It is more important and urgent than ever before to find the right balance between delivering to short-term financial pressures and long-term sustainability goals.

There are many examples of courageous leaders who in recent years have bet their careers in this direction, with enormous success. These include Paul Polman (ex Unilever CEO), Claus Aagaard from Mars, Jesper Brodin from IKEA, Rosa Macario from Patagonia, Tim Cook from Apple, and many others.

But what are the characteristics that make these leaders the benchmark for combating the climate crisis whilst keeping their companies with healthy and profitable growth?

Firstly, they have an ability to envision a fairer and more balanced future, aligned with a sustainable business vision.

Secondly, they have tremendous energy to promote change, based on technology and innovation, while being deeply empathetic with the various actors involved (employees, regulators and governments, partners, producers, and consumers).

Finally, the one that should be considered to be inseparable from the individual and the most important: their personal dedication to the cause of sustainability. They “walk the talk” rather than leadership based on the concept of “do what I say, not what I do”, and they strongly believe in social justice and protecting the environment.

This means that it is not enough to just put on the shoes of a leader who is aware of the challenges of sustainability and then take them off as citizens, consumers, educators, neighbours or friends. The leaders who live and breathe sustainability in their everyday lives will be the ones who identify opportunities for improvement in every corner of their company through innovation and technology – from changes in legislation and every production line to the processes of manufacture or extraction of raw material. Profit and future sustainability will be in the hands of those who know how to innovate, guided by the culture of their organization, driven by moral principles and oriented towards change.

And this is true for all of us, in the small gestures of each day, in our choices and through our actions. The planet earth has already survived many environmental catastrophes during its billion-year history. However, as the extinction of dinosaurs has proven, the human species does not necessarily have this same capacity to survive. If we continue to destroy the fragile ecosystem on which we depend, mother nature will be in charge of eliminating us and will continue on its evolutionary path. It is important that the leaders of today continue to remember this and make decisions which will ultimately deliver both profit and sustainability.

Author



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Rui Guedes de Quinhones joined EMA Partners in 2019 as Country Partner for Portugal. He has extensive experience in Strategic Development, Leadership & Organizational Assessment across several industries, such as Consumer, Retail & Services, Technology, Marcom, Government & Not-for-Profit, Healthcare and Financial Services.

Known for his role in the Not-For-Profit sector, Rui worked as Vice President of one of the largest social centers in the country and as President of the Portuguese Association of Cycling Without Age in Portugal, a popular movement started in 2012.

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