

Winds of Change in The Private Sector: Responsible Digital Leadership key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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Winning the Future: Private Sector is Critical for the SDGs

There are important moments, when values are afloat and when change may happen. Moments where the zeitgeist is changing. Those moments often grow out of crisis.

Initiated by the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis and fueled by the energy of the protests against racial injustice and the emergence of a new generation demanding change, we may find ourselves in such a moment as we face the disruptive forces of the Covid-pandemic.

2020 gave us the most serious health crisis in 100 years. The Covid-pandemic has stolen lives, rattled societies and led us straight into the most serious economic crisis in peacetime. This crisis has ruthlessly exposed societal weaknesses and has shredded away decades of economic growth and job gains, leaving us vulnerable to the many other serious crises we face.

Looking across the globe, the crisis has also reminded us of the importance of government -of collaboration between government and the private sector - and the fact, that concerted planned action works, and can advance development.

The pandemic has offered important learnings.

1. On rapid, constrained innovation as we searched for remedies, or lateral innovation such as when car manufacturers learned to produce ventilators or winemakers produce hand sanitizers.
2. We have learned new ways of working and made digital leaps toward the online transition and on accelerating other useful digitalization by years. Inclusive Digitization is important as we find our way out of the crisis. An example is [Casper.AI](#) where academics have come together to start a company that brings the power of distributed AI to help the elderly live a safe and comfortable live in their homes.
3. Perhaps most important though is the realization of the level of interconnectedness of our lives and how important it is to stand and work together. How directly our actions impact the lives of others and how we can mobilize and be innovative in collaboration for a more responsible and sustainable approach; how everyone comes out ahead,

when we do that. The facemask, and the active choice in caring for others by wearing it, is a strong symbol of this.

As we find our way out of the current crisis, we should reflect on these learnings. This is important for our continued efforts to fight global warming and the many other challenges we face. As we focus on the current crisis, small steps continue to be made in the area of more sustainable development and solving some of the other important issues at hand.

Embracing the Sustainable Development Goals Framework – Doing Business As Unusual

It's important that we realize the seriousness of the challenges ahead of us, and that we understand the huge opportunity for change. This calls for active involvement of industry and for a new type of responsible leadership and collaboration via the UN sustainable development goals framework.

World leaders agreed to the [17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) in New York in 2015 in acknowledgement of the existential crisis we find ourselves in - combating climate change, tackling massive inequality and more. See [UNDP video on integrated solutions](#). These goals weave together social, economic and environmental challenges and solutions – they recognize the interconnectedness of the challenges and have the deep spirit of leaving no one behind. Governments, philanthropy and civil society organizations around the world have embraced this global call to action and are collaborating on advancing the SDGs.

As we celebrate the 5th anniversary of the SDG's, there is agreement across sectors that we need deeper private sector engagement and a new type of business leadership to achieve the SDGs in the remaining 10 years. Doing Business as Usual will not suffice – business leaders need to focus on generating value to society and minimize harmful externalities - not just on profits for a few individuals.

The celebration of the 5th anniversary of the SDG's should serve as a call for active and joined effort by governments, civil society and business for a better world. The United Nation Sustainable Goals provide a substantial framework and metrics for a new responsible leadership.

The Business Case for Corporate Responsible Digital Leadership

This is not just a moral imperative for the private sector; consumers, markets, customers, employees also drive this shift. Industries leading the way will achieve a competitive advantage in this new era.

Some businesses are showing leadership. Examples include Maersk and Unilever, benefiting from demonstrating responsible leadership. Patagonia is a trailblazer on transforming by developing their core brand around a sustainable and inclusive approach to business. These companies reap the financial benefits of responsible business as consumers vote with their dollars, develop strong brand loyalty and have employees experiencing a deeper connection

with their employer. Salesforce is has set an example for the Tech Sector by explicitly stating that the Business of Business is to Improve the State of the World and this may be a factor in it's growth & success.

We also live in a moment when tech is transforming everything at an unprecedented pace and impact we have never seen before – for good and bad. Tech provides the infrastructure of the future and policy-makers will not be able to keep up by themselves. However, in collaboration with Business leaders they can better anticipate and design policy to mitigate the harmful effects of tech to society and on the organization. An example is recent significant challenges faced by Tech sector giants of Silicon Valley who have been summoned by US congress.

If the norms, societal expectations and requirements for business were to assume their full responsibility to society including on the digital front – measured on the value they bring to society and not just the profits they generate for their shareholders, we would be much further along on the SDGs and businesses would prosper financially. The growing impact investing trend shows that investors are eager to fund businesses with a double bottom line. We need investors, customers and other stakeholders to focus similarly on rewarding businesses focused on Responsible Digital leadership.

The Power of Collective Action: Public Private Partnerships and Unorthodox Collaborations

No one expects an individual company to tackle the SDGs, but how a business sees its role in individual and collectively contributing to solutions and taking responsibility for not doing harm will be a game-changer in solving the many challenges we face. This is especially true in the digital realm increasingly becoming foundational infrastructure to businesses.

Collaboration across sectors with businesses partnering with governments, UN, foundations can achieve the seemingly unsurmountable challenges and co-create solutions to tackle digital challenges and scale digital opportunities to advance the SDGs.

The Kenya SDG Platform is one example of cross-sectoral collaboration with partners across the world. The UN and Kenya have launched this platform inviting private sector actors, foundations, academics and innovators from across the world to help advance 4 prioritized SDGs. The Kenya SDG Accelerator Lab will bring together practitioners and academics from within country and beyond to explore cutting edge tech innovations from Kenya, Stanford, Berkeley and Silicon Valley to advance 4 SDGs. See Reuter's article on the [Africa's quest to achieve health care for all needs an unorthodox approach](#) on how such partnerships are being catalyzed to advance primary health care for all (SDG 3) in Kenya.

A similar example of innovative partnerships for change is the adoption of 13 Climate Partnerships by the Danish Government. The collaborative initiative invites industry and industry competences to develop solutions to achieve ambitious climate goals in 13 different

areas such as finance, production, life science, aviation and agriculture through active and ambitious co-creational partnerships with the Danish Government.

Thus we are pleased to be able to collaborate with Matthias De Bièvre, the aNewGovernance initiative (anewgovernance.org) and the Skills Alliance (skills-alliance.org) which unites public, private and academic organizations to form a Public Private Partnership to create human-centric data ecosystems, at the service of major societal issues such as employment, education and responsible mobility while at the same time bringing great value to businesses and organizations. Broader, shared and ethical access to data enables us to address many of the issues facing us collectively.

On this subject, Laurent Vidal, professor and research director at the University Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne and vice-president of the Institute for Digital Fundamental Rights (idfrights.org) states: "Today the evolution of law and human rights on subjects as complex as digital and artificial intelligence must be done hand in hand with the organizations and companies creating and using these technologies to ensure that regulation and legislation correspond to the realities on the ground".

What is Responsible Digital Leadership?

We need innovative solutions - efficient energy solutions, better and cleaner propulsion and more efficient solutions in a very high number of areas. Tech, data and innovation play an important role in fighting climate change and tackling the challenges we face. Artificial intelligence, autonomous technological solutions and better analysis through big data offers hope.

The Covid crisis has underscored the need to process large amounts of data for good, in order to rapidly develop effective and innovative solutions. To effectively stop global warming and advance the human development on hunger, health care and education we will have to develop transformative digital solutions.

But to do that we need to remember to be mindful and responsible. We need trust.

The past years a very high number of guidelines have been presented to curb the adversarial effects of technology. These will have to be integrated into the way we conduct business. We need a new approach to responsible digital leadership. The World Benchmarking Alliance's [Digital Inclusion Benchmark](#) is going to be ranking ICT companies.

Business will need to focus on issues such as including stakeholders in decisions, systems thinking, responsible innovation and impact. This means a strong focus on basic values such as fairness, transparency and accountability.

Industry will have to revisit their values and redefine their visions and core missions to ensure relevant focus not just on profit, but also on long term impact.

For most, this means developing new internal roles and organizational bodies such as ethics committees, platforms for stakeholder engagement, revitalized board dialogues and mechanisms to ensure diversity and strong internal discourse of feedback and pushback to ensure a culture of responsible thinking. The carrot for the weary to take this jump is, that this is also necessary to promote the culture of responsible innovation we need to drive business in the 21st century.

The fact that culture is crucial has been coined in many ways and has never been truer.

Whereas governance and guidelines are necessary and useful, a culture driven by transparent

and bold responsible leadership is key to this development. The means to this end is continuous learning and an ongoing dialogue about values and impact until it seeps into the DNA of the organization.

In addition to addressing these kinds of digital challenges and opportunities in their core business practice/offerings, it is critical that businesses look at technology impact and the SDGs with a global citizen lens looking outwards into the ecosystem. In its 2019 Human Development Report UN Development Program (UNDP) says that Climate change and technology rather than wealth and income are the modern-day wedges increasingly dividing the haves from the have-nots. "The climate crisis is already hitting the poorest hardest, while technological advances such as machine learning and artificial intelligence can leave behind entire groups of people, even countries. "Allowing these new inequalities to grow could be "extremely dangerous and highly volatile," said UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner.

We believe that bringing multiple actors from the corporate sector to collaborate on a framework for Responsible Digital Leadership is important. In this spirit we convened a handful of forward-thinking leaders from the financial sector in Europe at Stanford University in late 2019. Along with leading academics from Stanford University and U.C. Berkeley we brainstormed on co-creating a framework for Responsible Digital leadership.

www.responsibletech.io and [launched an initiative on Responsible Digital Leadership described in this recent Stanford Press Release.](#)

Transforming Challenges into Sustainable Solutions to achieve the SDGs

The private sector has a long history of developing innovative solutions to solve big problems. In this moment of existential crisis, who better than visionary private sector leaders to turn the challenges articulated in the SDG into business opportunities - by leveraging the power of innovative technology and new win-win business models – to bring sustainable transformation within the organizations and without, in their supply chains and in their communities, to create win-win solutions for business and society. We call on all business leaders across the world to embrace Responsible Digital leadership and the SDG framework. We call on them to bring the SDGs front and center in the core of their business, not just as a side CSR activity and design create win-win solutions that tackle the grand challenges of our times.

Corporate leaders who boldly institutionalize Responsible Digital Leadership to advance the SDGs can come out as winners.

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