

LEADERSHIP LAB

Why doubling down on purpose is the smartest move companies can make in 2025

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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By some accounts, 2024 was a down year for corporate purpose.

Eighteen U.S. states passed laws discouraging ESG (environment, social, governance). Nike cut 30 per cent of its sustainability staff. Accusations of purpose-washing, green-washing and legislation to combat both were rampant.

If surface-level wisdom is to be followed, then a business leader ought to run from the idea like it's radioactive.

But then there's reality.

Purpose is DNA. If it can't withstand changes in the opinion marketplace, then here's the proverbial tough pill: It's not genuine purpose. True purpose digs into why a business exists and the value it provides, transcending trends and cycles. Letting media cycles dictate direction risks losing the trust of employees, customers and other stakeholders.

The path forward isn't to abandon purpose but to double down on integrating it into the very fabric of decision-making and operations. Because it's not only possible to create economic value, delight your customers and engage employees while addressing societal needs – it's essential to ensure you make a profound and durable impact on the world around you.

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actuary and consultant, working with organizations to improve workplace health

and productivity, and as a business leader seeking to motivate high-performing teams to best serve our customers, I have observed a singular truth. When embraced authentically, true purpose is a competitive advantage that inspires trust and fosters deep connections with all your stakeholders and the communities in which you operate.

Resilient purpose is not static nor superficial. And there are four foundational steps to embedding it successfully.

1. Authenticity is everything

There's a kernel of wisdom in the suggestion that businesses should stay in their "own lane." But it's often framed in a restrictive way that discourages innovation or broader societal impact.

A pharmaceutical company need not overreach into solving every aspect of global health-care inequality, but it can focus on initiatives such as improving supply chain efficiency to lower costs or partnering with community health organizations to increase access to essential health care services. Aligning core competencies with societal needs exemplifies creating shared value – advancing a mission while strengthening market position.

This authenticity matters – it serves to build long-term loyalty, strengthens credibility and drives greater alignment between business objectives and societal expectations.

Despite rising, global anti-purpose headwinds, the facts show that Canadians still prioritize companies that care about their social impact. A recent Imagine Canada study found that an overwhelming 87 per cent of Canadians believe businesses should support their communities, and 71 per cent think profits should be reduced to advance social and environmental efforts.

There is zero ambiguity here. Canadian companies not only have the permission to embrace a socially conscious purpose, they are expected to.

The best way to make good on that expectation is not to be everything to everyone, but to hyper-focus on the authentic needs of your stakeholders and communities.

2. Impact demands partnership

Just because you've identified an authentic purpose doesn't mean you're on an island. Quite the opposite. Building partnerships with organizations that share your vision and expertise enables you to co-create solutions that amplify your impact far beyond what you could achieve independently.

This requires moving beyond outdated practices like writing cheques to tick boxes. Instead, companies should leverage their unique resources to tackle large-scale challenges collaboratively. At GreenShield, we use our expertise and data to improve access to health care. For example, through GreenShield Cares, we reinvest our excess earnings back into the community to expand vital health services. This includes focusing on areas where our community partners tell us help is needed most, like mental health support, affordable dental care and making essential medicines more accessible – all areas that are also core to our business and in which we have deep expertise.

3. Measurable impact drives purpose

The best way to advance a genuine purpose is to ensure it is tied to measurable results. Put another way, purpose without impact is simply wishful thinking.

Businesses must define clear metrics to track their impact – internally and externally – ensuring that purpose is more than a lofty mission statement. This means creating objectives and key results (OKRs) or key performance indicators (KPIs) that align purpose with core business objectives.

Moreover, transparency in sharing those metrics will amplify trust. Fifty-seven per cent of Canadian consumers doubt the validity of most green claims made by brands. Clear, credible reporting in external publications and reports not only combats skepticism but also positions businesses as leaders in accountability, fostering stronger connections with consumers and other stakeholders.

When purpose is tied to tangible, measurable impact, it shifts from being performative to transformative.

4. Empower employees to be purpose ambassadors

Purpose isn't just a C-suite ambition – it must resonate across every level of the organization. Employees are often the most credible and visible advocates of a company's mission, making their engagement critical to success.

A 2024 [Deloitte survey](#) found that 75 per cent of Gen Z and millennial workers cite societal impact as a key factor in employer selection, while most say purpose is critical to job satisfaction.

When employees see their contributions making a difference, they become ambassadors for the company's purpose. This not only strengthens internal culture but also amplifies the company's impact outwardly – through customer interactions, community involvement and even recruitment.

Empowered employees are purpose in action. They help embed purpose into every decision, interaction and outcome, making it an intrinsic part of the organization's identity.

In 2025, more companies may give reasons to cast skepticism on corporate purpose.

Personal experience tells me that true, resilient purpose, stands as the antidote to fleeting trends. Indeed, recent growth in GreenShield's business has allowed us to amplify our social impact investments, which we've increased fivefold.

Purpose is not a perk or a PR play – it's the DNA of a business that thrives by solving real problems and serving society authentically.

Doubling down on purpose isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart business thing to do. The choice is clear: embrace authentic purpose, forge partnerships, measure impact and empower your people – or risk losing the trust and engagement of your stakeholders and the communities that matter most.

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