



**PURPOSE  
PATHWAYS**

# **PURPOSE LEADERSHIP: LESSONS FROM PRACTICE**

# Purpose Leadership: Lessons from Practice

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**Definition of a Social Purpose:** Social Purpose is more than CSR. It's a business who understands deeply why they exist beyond profit and that Purpose is integrated throughout the organization to drive strategy and culture. It is a deep understanding of their optimal contribution to people and planet. Doing good is part of their business strategy!

*"When purpose is alive - truly lived- teams stay committed, leadership grows from within, and the business thrives long after its founders are gone. You can run a business without purpose, but you can't grow a great business without purpose."* - Tony Scott, CEO Pro-Claim Group

## Purpose-Driven Leadership as the Operating System for the Future

### Executive Summary

Organizations are operating in an era defined by complexity, accelerating change, and rising expectations from employees, customers, communities, and investors. Traditional leadership models—built on control, efficiency, and short-term optimization—are increasingly insufficient.

Over the last decade, Mary Ellen Schaafsma (now CEO Purpose Pathways) and Tessa Vanderkop (collaborator, Purpose Pathways) worked with over 50 businesses and their senior teams, helping integrate social purpose into their core business at the United Way BC's, Social Purpose Institute (SPI) and Purpose Pathways. While working with these businesses, representing a broad range of organizations from a variety of sectors, common themes consistently emerged about how these leaders led.

This report sets out to explore how a leadership shift is underway, one where social purpose is a strategic operating system.

### **Purpose is no longer aspirational. It is operational.**

The leaders succeeding in today's environment are not adding purpose onto existing strategies. They are using purpose as a leadership operating system—a decision-making, alignment, and coherence mechanism that enables organizations to navigate tension, complexity, and long-term responsibility while remaining commercially successful.

This report outlines the leadership moment we are in, what we heard from purpose-driven leaders, and the five core capabilities that define purpose-led leadership today.

### **The Leadership Moment We're In**

Organizations today are being asked to move faster while thinking longer-term; to deliver performance while earning trust; and to generate profit while taking responsibility for people, communities, and the planet.

These pressures are unfolding against a backdrop of geopolitical instability, climate change, biodiversity loss, digital and AI disruption, and regulatory systems struggling to keep pace. Risk is no longer purely financial—it is deeply embedded in social and environmental systems.

Many leaders feel this tension acutely. The prevailing leadership playbook—optimizing efficiency, managing risk narrowly, and prioritizing short-term performance—no longer works in a world defined by uncertainty and competing stakeholder demands.

What we are witnessing is not a failure of leadership, but an evolution of it. At the center of that evolution is purpose.

Not purpose as a slogan or values statement—but purpose as a strategic and operational discipline.

## **About Purpose Leadership: Lessons from Practice**

As principals of Purpose Pathways and collaborators in the Canadian purpose ecosystem, we have spent the last ten years working closely with organizations exploring and embedding social purpose. This work includes leadership development, organizational transformation, and ecosystem-building across sectors.

Following the closure of the Social Purpose Institute in 2024, we deepened our inquiry into what distinguishes leaders who are successfully navigating today's complexity. Over the last year, we convened focus groups, hosted leadership conversations, and developed a library of case studies across finance, manufacturing, publishing, technology, marketing, restoration, social enterprise, and resource distribution.

The leaders we engaged were predominantly small- to medium-sized enterprises—often family-owned, founder-led, or values-driven organizations. Many were already investing in community, sustainability, and ESG efforts but lacked a unifying framework to integrate these commitments strategically.

What emerged was a consistent leadership pattern: purpose, when clearly articulated and embedded, becomes the mechanism through which leaders align decisions, people, and long-term intent.

## **What We Heard: Purpose as a Leadership Operating System**

*“Without purpose, we could still be successful — but we wouldn't be building the kind of legacy that matters. It's not just what we achieve, it's how and why we do it.” - Liz McBeth, CEO, Armour Valve*

Across sectors, organizational sizes, and leadership styles, one conclusion was unmistakable:

## **Purpose-driven leadership is no longer aspirational. It is operational, strategic, and measurable.**

Leaders are using purpose to:

- Make faster, clearer decisions
- Navigate trade-offs without fragmenting their organizations
- Align people across silos, hierarchies, and differences
- Build trust in moments when authority alone is insufficient

This is not “good leadership plus purpose.” It is a distinct leadership model shaped by:

- Constant complexity and change
- Stakeholder capitalism
- Workforce expectations for meaning and integrity
- Systemic social and environmental challenges

The leaders succeeding today are not doing less business. They are doing better leadership.

## The Five Capabilities of Purpose-Driven Leadership

Purpose-led leadership functions as an integrated system. Throughout our project, five core capabilities consistently appeared.

### 1. Purpose as a Decision-Making Tool

Leaders repeatedly described purpose not as inspiration, but as a practical tool for navigating ambiguity.

*“We use our purpose as a scalpel. When things are unclear, it helps us cut through the noise and decide.” - Toby Barazzuol, Owner, Eclipse Awards*

For purpose-driven leaders, purpose is not inspiration—it is a filter.

Leaders described their purpose statement as a scalpel: a precise tool for navigating ambiguity and making both short- and long-term decisions. When purpose functions this way:

- Decision speed increases
- Ambiguity decreases
- Micro-decisions align with long-term intent

Rather than asking, “What is the fastest or easiest choice?” leaders ask, “Does this move us closer to who we are becoming?”

*“Purpose accelerates the reflection time required to make decisions.” - Hamish Khamisa, CEO of Sparx Publishing Group*

Purpose becomes decisive. Saying no becomes a strategic strength rather than a risk.

### 2. Long-Term and Systemic Orientation

For many leaders, adopting purpose leadership marked a conscious shift away from short-termism and toward stewardship.

*“We still care deeply about performance, but purpose changed the time horizon of our decisions. We’re asking what value this creates over time — not just this quarter.” - Hamish Khamisa, CEO Sparx Publishing Group*

Purpose-driven leaders are intentionally rejecting short-termism—not because they disregard performance, but because they understand that resilience and legacy cannot be optimized quarter by quarter.

These leaders explicitly optimize for:

- Long-term resilience
- Multi-stakeholder impact
- Organizational legacy

Profit remains essential, but it is framed as an outcome of purpose rather than its replacement. Leaders are willing to choose slower, more complex paths when those paths align with who the organization exists to serve over time.

### 3. Empathy as Leadership Infrastructure

Several leaders emphasized that empathy fundamentally reshaped how they serve customers, employees, and communities.

*“If you only look through a financial lens, you can crush people. Empathy helps us serve working people in a way that’s principled and human.”* - Kirsten l’Anson, VP People & Culture, Community Savings Credit Union

One of the most underestimated findings in the research is the role of empathy.

Empathy is no longer a “soft skill.” It is core leadership infrastructure.

As leaders make decisions affecting people across lines of race, gender, geography, class, and lived experience, empathy enables them to:

- Design for complexity
- Take principled risks in service of inclusion and fairness
- Build trust where authority alone fails

Organizations that treat empathy as strategy—not sentiment—report measurable gains in engagement, retention, trust, and innovation.

### 4. Leveraging Tension Rather Than Avoiding It

Rather than eliminating tension, leaders described purpose as a way to determine which tensions are catalyzing versus paralyzing.

*“Purpose doesn’t remove tension — it tells us which tensions are worth holding.”* - Baljit Lalli, Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, Circular Materials

Purpose-driven leaders expect tension between:

- Productivity and well-being
- Profit and impact
- Speed and inclusion
- Efficiency and ethics

Purpose acts as a stabilizing force, enabling healthy debate without fragmentation and innovation without mission drift. When guided by purpose, tension becomes the birthplace of innovation rather than a source of erosion.

## 5. Shared, Not Heroic, Leadership

Leaders were clear that purpose cannot be carried by one individual alone.

*“When purpose is truly lived, leadership grows from within. Teams stay committed, and the business thrives long after its founders are gone.”* - Tony Scott, CEO, the Pro-Claim Group

Purpose does not scale through a single leader.

In purpose-driven organizations, purpose is:

- Co-created
- Embedded in recruitment, governance, onboarding, and daily work
- Lived through behavior rather than enforced through hierarchy

Leadership becomes relational, trust-centered, and distributed. Notably, many of the leadership styles proving most effective today—particularly those emerging from women leaders—are deeply rooted in listening and long-term stewardship.

The future of leadership looks less heroic and more collective.

### What This Means for Leaders Now

If there is one defining takeaway from this research, it is this:

#### **Purpose is replacing power as the primary alignment mechanism in leadership.**

When authority fails, purpose aligns. When silos harden, purpose creates common ground. When priorities compete, purpose clarifies what matters most.

Leadership is shifting:

- From control to coherence
- From persuasion to shared meaning
- From individual excellence to collective impact

Leaders who embrace this shift are not only building stronger cultures—they are building more resilient, future-ready businesses.

### Closing: A Leadership Choice

The question is no longer whether purpose belongs in leadership. The question is how deliberately we choose to use it.

Will purpose be:

- A statement or a system?
- A comfort or a courage practice?
- An individual belief or a shared discipline?

*"B Corp and purpose-driven companies really stand out and as businesses we also want to align our work, with our values, with the world we want to help create. A strong purpose attracts and retains top talent. Employees are more engaged and motivated when they feel like their work contributes to a greater cause. And an engaged workforce allows you to grow and scale more quickly. As a leader you need to be on top of those things." - Mike McIsaac, CEO and Managing Director, Baker Tilly Capital*

The leaders shaping the future are choosing the harder path. They are using purpose to decide, not just inspire; to align, not control; and to build legacies, not just results.

The purpose-driven economy will be built in community—by leaders willing to share ownership, hold tension, and lead with clarity in complexity.

Purpose Leadership: Lessons From Practice offers a view into this emerging leadership model—and an invitation to continue the conversation.

## Source events and documents

### Embedding Purpose Across the Business Lifecycle Webinar

Kiirsten May, co-owner Uphouse Marketing  
Mike Mclsaac CEO Baker Tilly Capital  
Chris Peacock, serial entrepreneur, CEO Kilterset

### Women Leading Purpose Webinar

Liz McBeth, CEO Armour Valve  
Mo Duffy – Co-owner and Publisher, Pownal Street Press  
Kirsten l'Anson VP Human Resources, Community Savings Credit Union  
Eliana Trinaistic Director Social Purpose and Impact at MCIS Language Solutions

### Purpose Leaders' Focus Group

Baljit Lalli, Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, Circular Materials  
Chris Peacock, CEO Kilterset  
Hamish Khamisa, Owner Sparx Publishing Group  
Kirsten l'Anson, VP Human Resources and Culture Community Savings Credit Union  
Toby Barazzuol, Owner Eclipse Awards  
Chelsea Gieschen, Vice President Royal Printers

### Case Studies

Community Savings Credit Union | We exist to unite working people for a better world.

Eclipse Awards | We exist to empower and uplift communities, making earth-friendly trophies to celebrate everyday people and unite the human spirit!

Platinum Pro-Claim Restoration | We exist to restore lives, the planet, and communities.

MCIS Language Solutions | We exist to uphold the human right to be informed, heard and understood.

Pownal Street Press | We exist to give rise to brave stories, and to be a light for community and connection.

Armour Valve | We exist to transform infrastructure for a healthy, thriving planet.