

Interview: Unilever's Paul Polman on diversity, purpose and profits

Paul Polman talks about authenticity, transparency, a sense of purpose in business and why profit warnings don't worry him

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CEO of Unilever Paul Polman addressing the Nutrition for Growth global hunger summit in June, 2013. Photograph: Andrew Cowie/AFP/Getty Images

Paul Polman, CEO of consumer goods multinational [Unilever](#), is considered by many to be the leading light in the corporate sustainability movement.

He recognises the power of partnerships as well as greater [diversity](#) and inclusiveness in driving change in what he describes as a [Vuca](#) world; volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

Criticising the financing sector for being self-obsessed and self-interested, he calls on all CEOs to recognise they "cannot be a bystander in the system that gives you life in the first place". Polman brushes aside the [profits warning](#) Unilever made this week and says it will not sway him from taking a long-term approach to the business.

What are the main ingredients for an effective leader?

First of all, you need to feel comfortable about who you are. So a good leader, I think, is a good human being in the first place. Too often we are being programmed by the environment around us to behave differently. But I think a true leader is an authentic person, who feels good about who he is.

I don't have a problem crying when I need to cry. There's nothing wrong with that and showing that you care because it's the same in any organisation; if you show that you care, others will care for you, 100%.

Often people ask me what my job is and I say honestly it is to make others successful, and the more you do that the more you will see that you create prosperity.

What is the role of humility in leadership?

Working together on solving something requires a high level of humility and a high level of self-awareness. When we launched the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, people inside the company were very worried about exposing ourselves. But I did something there that I didn't realise at the time, but that actually made a big difference, by just saying publicly I don't have all the answers on how to do this and I can't do it alone. I still say it today, and actually it's becoming more difficult as we progress towards the 10-year goal that we set.

Is it important to have a sense of purpose?

I know we all have our jobs, but that has to come from a deeper sense of purpose. You have to be driven by something. Leadership is not just about giving energy but it's unleashing other people's energy, which comes from buying into that sense of purpose.

But if that purpose isn't strong enough in a company, if the top doesn't walk the talk, then the rest will not last long. The key thing for CEOs is to make that a part of your operating model.

We all need to be way beyond CSR, and yet we still talk about it as CSR, which is basically activity-driven but not holistic. The concept of shared value is good but I think it is a post-rationalisation of not getting in trouble with society.

Now some people will say that's too pessimistic but I think it's realistic. Companies will now have to provide solutions to some of these challenges and be co-responsible and that's a higher level than that we have talked until now. Unfortunately not many see it as being absolutely crucial but it will come, I'm convinced.