
Purpose Centre of Gravity

Research
Report



The Challenge

At the end of last year, the Forward Institute (FI), A Blueprint for Better Business (Blueprint), and ReGenerate hosted a meeting with representatives from BITC, BLab UK, CISL, Forum for the Future, the Institute for Business Ethics and others to explore how these and other same-field organisations might better collaborate to help organisations to become purpose-led.

FI, Blueprint, and ReGenerate had been hearing from purpose and sustainability practitioners in business that they found the 'purpose ecosystem' hard to navigate. In particular, practitioners struggled to know where to turn for insight, examples, and peer support on how their organisations can become truly purpose-led.

The purpose ecosystem consists of a lot of small, passionate, and knowledgeable organisations that are working towards similar goals. There was a belief among the three organisations that if they do not find a way to collaborate and collectively scale the impact of their work, we may not see the pace and scale of change that is needed. There was also a belief that uninformed or superficial attempts at implementing purpose could risk a backlash that could set the whole movement back. The project was therefore named 'Purpose Centre of Gravity' (COG).

The participants at the meeting agreed that a good first step was to carry out some research to test these initial hypotheses, and to explore whether collaboration might help address them.

This report is an outcome of that research, carried out by Ingvild Rasmussen, who was jointly hired by FI and Blueprint in January 2023.

Ingvild used desktop research and interviews with 22 corporate practitioners - from twenty large companies across the energy, retail, legal, consulting, media, transport and other sectors - and 14 same-field representatives to better understand (1) practitioners' challenges and needs in transforming their organisations and (2) same-field organisations' contribution to helping companies to be purpose-led and their appetite for collaboration. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and coded to systematically capture (re)emerging themes and patterns across interviews.



Summary of Key Findings

Five key findings emerged across the two groups of interviews. There is more detail on each point in the appendix of the report.

1 Top-level support is crucial to catalyse and drive change

- Purpose initiatives typically start with a new CEO or Chair
- Practitioners without strong top-level support find that purpose stays out of important strategic decisions and remains an individual motivation, team effectiveness, or branding tool
- Senior leadership can role model the purpose and drive a sense of accountability to deliver on purpose in the rest of the organisation

2 Practitioners are missing practical how-to guides and case studies

- Practitioners want case studies that
 - give a good story of how purpose can help their organisation, to help make the case internally, or
 - demonstrate different ways that organisations have approached becoming purpose-led with practical examples
- Practitioners are also missing more practical guidance on what to read and who to talk to; how to communicate about purpose to different stakeholders; how to influence senior leaders and help them use purpose in decision-making; how to measure progress on and impact of purpose; and how to truly embed purpose at all layers of the organisation

3 Practitioners want to learn with and from those in similar roles in other organisations

- Practitioners want to be connected with people in similar roles to them in communities of practice
- They want these communities to be small, cross-sector, psychologically safe, and focused on working through challenges together – getting past generic talk and best practice
- Several communities of practice already exist, such as NatWest, Blueprint and Imagine's Purpose-Led Business Community of Practice (PLBCOP); King's College Meaning and Purpose Network; Purpose Into Action; Purpose Collective; and the Sustainable Markets Initiative's task forces

4 There is considerable alignment among same-field organisations around what being purpose-led should mean

- Having a common ambition is a key success factor for collaboration
- Most same-field interviewees' definition of purpose-led centres around an organisation's clear sense of why it exists and how it can specifically contribute to the well-being of people and planet, or a more just and regenerative society

5 Same-space interviewees have surprisingly little knowledge of how other same-field organisations work, with whom, and why



Recommendations

1

Focus on learning about and developing the practical how-to through communities of practice

Several communities of practice already exist, and a number of the practitioners interviewed are members of these. Having carried out a high-level review of existing communities, **the recommendation is that FI and Blueprint explore** how they and other same-field organisations can **participate in and enhance** the work of these communities, in line with the practitioner needs evident in the research.

The recommendation is therefore that same-field organisations should focus on fostering communities of practice that are **cross-sector**, have a **high degree of trust and openness**, and are **focused on making change** and working through challenges together.

This could then also be a way of **supporting the development of practical how-to** with and alongside practitioners. It is recommended that the PLBCOP's working group share what they are learning from facilitating a community of practice with other same-field organisations.

Rather than start another community from scratch, this approach **builds on existing momentum and relationships**. It is also recommended that same-field organisation should work to include more practitioners in these networks.

The PLBCOP working group has started looking into how same-field organisations could participate in and enhance the work of communities of practice.



Recommendations

2

Increase knowledge sharing between same-field organisations and align around a common goal

Based on same-field interviews, the recommendation is that **same-field organisations should find a way to meet regularly** to discuss how they work, with whom, why, and which challenges they are currently grappling with. This could take the form of building a **community of critical friends** that learn from and challenge on another.

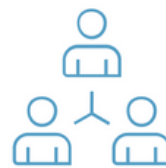
This could be a way for each organisation to **reflect and improve on their own ways of working**, and to **develop a deeper understanding of the system** – which organisations hold which piece(s) of the puzzle, and what kind of approaches are missing? Which challenges can their approaches solve, and which can they not?

It could also be a way of discovering that there is **considerable alignment around what these organisations are working towards**, potentially creating an opportunity to be more explicit or public about these goals.

FI and Blueprint are currently looking into how they can convene meetings to build closer relationships with other same-field organisations.

These recommendations and actions are **small steps** towards a **more substantively collaborative future**. This research also produced a set of more ambitious recommendations: reverse-engineering practical how-to based on experience and case studies; influencing senior leadership; and defining a common goal.

Based on discussions held, Forward Institute and Blueprint can see a future where these forms of collaboration are developed. The smaller steps outlined above are a way to learn, explore, and build stronger relationships before we start developing something bigger.



What's Next?

FI and Blueprint are starting to take steps to build further on this research, such as looking at how they can convene meetings with same-field organisations and further participate in and enhance the PLBCOP.

We would love for you and your organisation to use what is in this report to codify and share your learnings about practical how-to, or to reach out within your network to foster community and co-learning.

We want to hear your perspective on this research piece, and what you would like to see next. If you have any thoughts or questions or want to get involved with our efforts in fostering community among same-field organisations and practitioners, please contact Alexandra Jolly (alexandra.jolly@forward.institute) or Soulla Kyriacou (soulla.kyriacou@blueprintforbusiness.org).



Appendix



Top-Level Support

1

Almost every interviewee (17/20) emphasised how important top-level support is to drive change in their organisation to become more purposeful or responsible.

- **Catalyst:** Purpose initiatives typically start with a new CEO or Chair
- **Centrality:** Practitioners in companies without strong top-level support find that purpose stays out of important strategic decisions and instead remains an individual motivation, team effectiveness tool, or branding exercise
- **Role-modelling:** people further down in the organisation are much less likely to act in line with the purpose if the CEO and Board do not. The senior leadership can also create a sense of accountability in the rest of the organisation to deliver on purpose

For those that did not have initial top-level support, and have worked to influence or change the mindset of their leaders, this is what they say has worked:

- **Business case:** differentiation and competitiveness, opportunities, investor pressure, reputation, HR case (what does talent want?). Not necessarily business case in terms of 'how can we make money from this?', but how purpose and responsibility can help our company more widely
- **Credible actors:** 6/20 interviewees said that senior leaders are very trusting in elite academic institutions (Oxbridge, Harvard), CEOs/CFOs of other successful organisations, and/or big consultancies (McKinsey, Bain, BCG, PwC). Business leaders want someone who truly understands business and are sceptical that people in charities and non-profits do
- **Training/new knowledge:** Some mentioned that the problem is not resistance to purpose or responsibility itself, but a lack of knowledge about and confidence to act meaningfully on these issues. Leaders feel comfortable talking about balance sheets and income statements but not purpose, and they do not have time to spend a lot of time reading or going on courses to learn



How-To and Case Studies

2

Almost all interviewees (17/20) expressed some version of missing more practical guidance and/or case studies on how to be purpose-led.

Theory versus practice. There is a lot of theoretical work, academic work, and high-level discussion of purpose but very little on how to do it in practice. This (1) makes it hard to know what to do and (2) makes it harder to get senior leaders on board because they don't engage well with non-business-language.

Not a blueprint. Most interviewees were clear that a purpose journey is going to be ambiguous, uncertain, and full of trial and error, so that there cannot be a clear step-by-step framework. Instead, they want an open framework or guide.

Certain recurring themes seem relevant to most organisations:

- **Guide to the basics.** What to read and who to talk to about purpose, concept clarification and common misconceptions. What kind of things will need to be done and how to do them (e.g., changing business model)
- **Communication.** How to communicate about purpose and sustainability to different kinds of stakeholders (the why, how, and what). How to talk about the good things you are doing when you might face backlash and criticism for your shortcomings as a result
- **Senior leaders.** How to talk to senior leaders about the practical aspects of purpose, how to get them to understand how different it is to run a purpose-led firm, and to use purpose in their decision-making. How to maximise your influence on senior leaders in the little time you have with them
- **Measurement.** how to measure and report on progress on and impact of purpose
- **Culture change.** How to embed purpose at all layers of the firm, keeping it at the front of people's minds and getting them to use it in their daily job

Then, there are more specific things:

- How to adapt purpose to relevant regulatory frameworks for our company's sector
- How to do purpose as a start-up, in a partnerships or franchise structure.
- How to embed purpose in your supply chain
- Best practice metrics for reporting on climate transition; toolkits for measuring biodiversity impact; run this exercise with your sustainability council when you're preparing a board paper
- One person suggested these more specific/technical things should be by practitioners for practitioners – something like an online forum, LinkedIn, or WhatsApp group



Case studies help with the how-to and with influencing senior leaders. Interviewees ask for two types of case studies:

- **Robust examples with clear business cases** (not necessarily how can we make money for this, but how can this help our organisation); helps make the case internally; people love a good story, inspirational stories that show the art of the possible, how someone was brave and reaped benefits from it
- **Different models and ways of doing purpose**; examples of what organisations have done with practical examples; learning what worked and what didn't. This is related to the practical how-to



Community

3

16/20 interviewees emphasised the value of community and being connected with people who (a) are in similar roles to them and/or (b) are further ahead in the purpose journey.

Experienced practitioners. Getting advice from someone further ahead in the journey can help get leadership teams on board, as they get a better idea of what being purpose-led means and what challenges and benefits it can bring. It also helps the purpose practitioner with practical how-to

Communities of practice. Most interviewees want spaces for purpose practitioners to do collective reflection. Three themes came up:

- **Making change.** What's needed is a space for collective reflection where people can think about purpose for themselves and work together on making systemic change. It should be less about best practice and more about challenges, knowledge-sharing, and working together - innovating and getting past the generic
- **Diversity and relevance.** Interviewees sought diversity in types of organisation: it should be cross sector, but designed carefully so that there are enough synergies for it to be relevant (e.g., professional services firms, people working on environmental sustainability and decarbonisation versus purpose more generally)
- **Psychological safety.** The group must have a high degree of trust, and enough time, space, regularity, and informality to get to know each other well and be honest. People must be able to speak openly and share frustrations, and things that are said must be confidential (at a minimum, Chatham House rules). Most interviewees ask for a small group (6-10 maximum), with at least some of the meetings in person

Several communities of practice already exist, which cover some of the needs listed above, while others remain unmet. For instance, NatWest, Blueprint and Imagine's Purpose-Led Business Community of Practice (PLBCOP); King's College Meaning and Purpose Network; Purpose Into Action; Purpose Collective; and the Sustainable Markets Initiative's task forces



Same-Field Potential



Aligning around a common goal. Having a common goal or ambition was frequently listed as one of the most important success factors for collaboration.

There is considerable alignment among same-field interviewees around what being purpose-led should mean, and there might be value in being more public about that.

Roughly, most interviewees' understandings of purpose centre around an organisation's clear sense of why it exists and how it can specifically contribute to the well-being of people and planet, or a more just and regenerative society.

PAS808 was already a great effort to create a standard for/definition of purpose. Some interviewees said that they think it is too technical and/or that there are aspects they disagree with.

Same-field interviewees have surprisingly little knowledge of how other same-field organisations work, with whom, and why. There is some overlap in type of approach and specific clients, with seemingly little awareness of this.

