INSIGHTS

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Interview

Imagine a Better World: An Interview with Paul Polman, AIB 2023 International Executive of the Year

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Paul Polman, former CEO of Unilever, business leader, climate and equality campaigner, and co-author of *Net Positive: How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take* (2021), was selected as the 2023 AIB International Executive of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB). In this first part of a two-part article, Paul Polman discusses with Lorraine Eden his efforts at Unilever and Imagine to address societal problems, the themes of *Net Positive*, and how businesses and academics can help create a better future.

Interviewer: Lorraine Eden [LE], Texas A&M University, USA

Interviewee: Paul Polman [PP], Imagine / Former CEO of Unilever

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Paul Polman, CEO of Unilever (2009 to 2010), and co-author of the 2021 book *Net Positive: How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take*, was selected as the 2023 AIB International Executive of the Year by the Fellows of the Academy of International Business (AIB) and recognized at the Opening Plenary at the AIB meetings in Warsaw, Poland, on 6 June 2023.

The International Executive of the Year Award was established by the AIB Fellows to recognize business leaders who have significantly improved the reputation and performance of their respective organizations on the international stage. Recipients typically have been individuals with a reputation of impeccable integrity and a performance track-record admired by stakeholders and competitors alike.

Polman was awarded this honor in recognition of his unsurpassed leadership in the area of global business and sustainability. Born and raised in the Netherlands and educated at the University of Groningen and University of Cincinnati, as CEO of Unilever, he propagated and practiced a management philosophy that emphasized the dual roles of business: creating financial value and contributing to addressing societal problems. Today he works across a range of organisations to deliver the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which he helped develop. In *Net Positive*, Polman and his co-author Andrew Winston describe the practical ways in which companies can help address some of humanity's grand challenges like climate change and inequality, while building successful businesses.

INTERVIEW

[LE]: Mr. Polman, welcome to the Academy of International Business and congratulations on your 2023 International Executive of the Year Award.

[PP]: I am honored to receive this award and glad that I can receive it in this beautiful city of Warsaw. I would like to dedicate this award to the people who are not here because they still do not have a chance to make it past the age of five. The people who do not have access to food. Who are excluded from education, which has benefited us so much – and, unfortunately, that is still the majority of people in the world. I want this prize that you, the Academy of International Business (AIB) and the AIB Fellows, give to great business leaders to go to even more determination to ensure that we do not leave anybody behind.

[LE]: Could you tell us a bit about the history behind why you wrote *Net Positive*?

[PP]: Why did Andrew Winston and I co-author the book *Net Positive*? I did not want to write a book. I had always been critical of CEOs who write books because the motive was either to change history or stroke their image. Many CEOs justify what they did to basically please themselves or (unfortunately, a very narrow definition of success) their shareholders.

Most CEOs are aware of what we need to do now and why we need to do it, but CEOs struggle with the how. So that is why Andrew and I wrote the book *Net Positive* to show how courageous companies thrive by giving more than they take. We basically ask ourselves two questions. *How can companies profit from solving the world's problems, not creating the world's problems? And is the world better off because your company is in it – yes or no?* These are very simple questions to me, but I am not sure how many CEOs that I am posing these questions to can really answer that.

One of the brands I bought when I was in Unilever was called T2 (Tea Too) from Australia. Forty percent of the store sales were tea accessories because people love that stuff. In these stores, if you break something, you own it, you pay for it. That is how most stores work. Why does that not work with business? If you break it, you own it. That is a concept we do not think exists for some reason.

Many CSR people write these wonderful CSR reports. What do these reports say? A little bit less carbon in the atmosphere. A little bit less plastics in the oceans. A little bit less deforestation. A little less bad is still bad. So I say to the CEOs, if you say your company put 30 percent less plastics in the oceans, why not next year publish your CSR report saying I still feel very happy to have 70 percent of my plastics go into the oceans? How does that sound? Then do not do it.

What we need is a mindset that gets people to think *regenerative, restorative and reparative*, and that is what we call *Net Positive*. On environmental issues, *Net Positive* means not being less bad or not bad. It actually means what we now need is to repair the damage we have done.

You cannot run a *Net Positive* company if people themselves are not sustainable. You cannot have a purposeful company if you do not have a purpose yourself. Just like you cannot be a sustainable company if you are not sustainable yourself. I argue you cannot love other people if you do not love yourself. So it starts with us. Our first chapter in *Net Positive* is therefore, "Do you care?"

[LE]: You talk in *Net Positive* about the importance of leadership. Why is leadership so important?

[PP]: You know, we are short of leaders. We clearly need to have better leaders. If there is one thing that I can say with a high level of confidence is that we do not have enough leaders at the political or business levels now. Not because they are bad people but they are simply not prepared for dealing with the challenges that we have today.

That is one of the reasons why the average tenure of a CEO has fallen to about four and a half years. I stayed as CEO at Unilever for a bit more than 10 years because that is what it takes to really have an impact. The average length of a publicly traded company has now dropped to 17 years; it used to be 67 years when I was born. We simply do not have the leaders anymore to run these companies, and I do not have to talk to you about politicians.

Most CEOs in this world are worried about three things if you put their family aside. The first is resilience. How do you run businesses for the short term and the long term? Most of them get pulled down to the lowest common denominator. It really is hard work nowadays to keep your head above water. How do you deal with the dichotomies that are built into any business model?

The second thing, not surprisingly, is AI, ChatGPT, the digital economy. It is a disruptor and many people are from a generation where they hardly know what a computer looks like.

And finally, you have sustainability because it is affecting every business. It does not matter if you are sitting on the left or the right, or if you are born in the developed or the developing world. Any business now, whether you like it or not, is being affected by the changes that are happening to these planetary boundaries that we are starting to challenge in a significant level.

Many people call this a "perma-crisis", which is an extended period of instability and insecurity. Other people call it a "poly-crisis" where so many depressing forces are coming together to create one big alarming super situation. I think this is the state of being that we must get used to for the next 20, 30, or 40 years. It is not going to change much quicker.

We are actually facing the most important challenge that we have because we are working very hard to destroy our own life support systems. It is very hard to explain to people that nature and humans are not different; we are an integral part of nature. In fact, we are nature but we have become accustomed to living in this concrete metropole. The average child does not even know where apples come from. The closest children will tell you, if you ask them, is that apples come from the supermarket! We have totally distanced ourselves from nature, from something that gives us a reason for being that is actually an integral part of us.

[LE]: In *Net Positive*, you talk about courageous leaders; who and what are they?

[PP]: I like the word courage in courageous leaders because it comes from the Latin word "cor" or the French word "coeur", which is the heart. I think we have all learned that anything that goes through the heart to the brain is more likely to stick than if it goes straight in the brain and out again. We need courageous leaders.

During COVID if we saw one thing it was bifurcation of business models. We clearly saw that the longer term, more sustainable, purpose-driven business models were doing better than shareholder short-term profit models. We also saw, surprisingly or not, a bifurcation in leadership. Leaders who had a high sense of humanity, humility, empathy, and compassion, who were purpose driven, embraced partnerships that were multi-generational. These were the leaders that instilled trust in a time of high anxiety. These were the leaders that people wanted to follow. These were the business leaders who energized their companies.

What courageous leaders means in *Net Positive* is, first and foremost, taking responsibility for your total impact on the world. All the consequences. Many if not most companies still think they can outsource their value chain and also outsource their responsibility. That does not work anymore.

If you are Facebook, it is great if Mark Zuckerberg says I bring people together. So, does Zuckerman take responsibility for the hate speech that is on his platform? The child pornography? The addiction? You cannot run a platform if you do not take responsibility for your total impact.

It is the same for Unilever. If my company is in the food business, the company is responsible for the deforestation on the one side and the obesity on the other side. *Net Positive* companies set targets in line with what the science needs, not targets the company can get away with. It is so easy to have your "Pinocchio nose" grow longer by fooling the world and setting targets that look impressive but do not mean anything. This is where courageous leaders come in.

Companies should also have courage. Most CEOs will set a target only if they know they can achieve it or if they already have achieved the target. But I would argue if the target does not make you feel uncomfortable, or if you already have all the answers, then your targets are not ambitious enough.

Net Positive companies have the courage to work for all their stakeholders. When I became CEO of Unilever, I stopped quarterly reporting. I said to many in the financial market, I do not work for you. I work for these people out there that need our help. I will try to do this in a way that is good for you, and that is why you want to invest in this company, but it will also be good for all the other stakeholders. Courage is about optimizing your stakeholder return to all of your stakeholders; it is not about maximizing for one.

[LE]: Why should business leaders take up the challenge of being courageous?

[PP]: In addition to the moral reasons for being courageous and taking on these grand challenges, there is actually is a big financial reason. Because we have waited so long, we are at the point where the cost of NOT acting is actually higher than the cost of acting.

This is true for every one of the Sustainable Development Goals. Our food system is so broken, you would not believe it. We cut the forests of this world. We keep the farmers poor. We keep people stunted. We have 30 to 40 percent of food wasted as if we do not care. We have one billion people going to bed hungry every night. We have two and a half billion people who are overweight or obese. The cost of that system is about $12 trillion.

With a meager investment of $150 to $200 billion a year, we could turn that into a $4 trillion positive. In fact, Deloitte did a study not long ago that said, if we stay on the trajectory of climate change we are on right now, by 2070, we will have $178 trillion of incremental cost. If we bend that curve and go to one and a half degrees of global warming, we would actually have a $43 trillion benefit.

Smart businesspeople are moving; do not be mistaken. They understand that they have a choice to either position their businesses right for the future, for this green economy, or stay stuck in the brown economy because they have a vested interest. But the businesses that do not move, that do not jump on this train that has already left the station, I can tell you they are heading for the graveyard of dinosaurs.... The businesses that understand it, however, we can now show over and over again that these companies and industries have a higher return and ESG funds over time perform most likely better.

But why do we always have to prove this? This is my challenge to you. Why should we have to prove that gender-balanced companies perform better than male-run companies? Why not prove that male-run-only companies are the biggest insult to humanity we have invented? Why should we have to prove that ESG funds always perform better, when 90 percent of non-ESG funds have a lot of "bologna" in them as well? We need to put the burden of proof at a different level if we want to accelerate the things so many companies are changing.

[LE]: Multinationals have to deal with a huge range of socio-political and institutional contexts. How did you handle problems Unilever faced in countries where the standards of behavior were very different from at home?

[PP]: This is why it is so important to have your purpose clear. If you have this clear purpose and clear values, and you are able to match these values with behavior, which ultimately drives the culture, I think that any decision that you deal with in whatever environment is in a sense the same. My wife wrote a book, *Values for a Life Economy,* which came out of focus groups they did during Covid. In it she distilled ten basic values. The most important one for her is the Golden Rule that you find in every religion across the world: do unto others, and she adds the planet to it so, do unto others and the planet as you would like to have done unto yourself.

I have often been in situations in Unilever, and by virtue of being the CEO, forced to make decisions on which others cannot agree because the data are not so clear. The essence of the role of CEO has to be based upon strong moral values and conviction in a certain direction. Decisions are, unfortunately, not all supported by data. You need to be fast in making these decisions and fast in changing if they are the wrong decision. Resilience cannot be discussed if you do not discuss agility. It is the moral values that I think guide you in any environment. What you see now is perhaps more difficult than what it was before, but, when I came, it was the financial crisis and many other things. My predecessors will give you stories about how difficult it was then. I do not think that there is really a time bomb. Values should permeate business for the longer term. At the end of the day, every decision you take as a CEO has to be built on these values. If you do not want something to happen to your families or someone else, you should work very hard to ensure that others are not put in that situation either.

Let me give you two examples. When I was CEO of Unilever, I visited a tea plantation where I saw that the female workers were being abused and sexually harassed. So, we put policies in place but they did not work because the abuse and harassment occurred outside working hours. There are always other environmental things that you cannot fully control but I said I do not want my daughters or my wife to be treated like that. The only way that it changed was when we made the supervisors women. We were the only tea plantation in the world that was run by women. All of a sudden, women were not being assigned to fields that put them at risk after work.

In another case, we worked in the UK with Kevin Havelock financing and implementing the modern-day slavery act. All the CEOs were saying, you are crazy to do this. I was publishing two human rights reports when nobody else was. People told us that we would be attacked for being transparent about these problems. I said, no. We are going to say that these are the issues in society that we don't accept. We will fight very hard to get them out of our system. And the basic driver is that I would not want to be treated like that. We created the Minimum Wages Coalition because some people cannot live on the wages we pay. It is all driven by the conviction that our employees should be treated the way we would want to be treated. Where I had the biggest problem was when critics said that it is easy for me to talk about that because you earn a thousand times more, ten thousand times more, a hundred thousand times more than a picker. But, at the end of the day, every decision you take as a CEO has to be built on these values. If you do not want something to happen to your families or someone else, you should work very hard to ensure that others are not put in that situation either.

[LE]: What are you doing now that you've stepped down from Unilever? What goals do you hope to achieve?

[PP]: Let me start by explaining my move out of Unilever. People say, "Did you retire?" And I always explain that I do not like the word retire because it sounds like you were tired before and you are tired again, which is not very appealing to me!

When you run these large multinational companies, whether you like it or not (and there is a lot of serendipity about how you get there) there is either moral or formal authority, which probably allows you to do a lot of things.

But if you leave and go out – and you do not have the several million people organization that we had at Unilever for operating in 190 countries and for trying to reach four or five billion consumers every day with our products – you really move into a territory of moral authority, and I think that is a much better territory in which to be. If you are able to move changes there, then it has much more impact in society. This is really what I felt was the right thing to do because you have to live your life with your maximum impact.

The most important things that I focus on now, next to the philanthropic foundations that my wife and I are running, are to look at three key drivers of change that we need to make work in society. We have discovered that trying to optimize ourselves in a system that is not quite working is getting close to lunacy and that is what we are seeing right now. It is the stress that you see in the political levels and in the people on the streets. Most of our attention goes to putting bandages on the issues that we see instead of really taking a pause and step back and attacking these underlying issues that need to be addressed. That is really what I focus on now.

There are three areas that I think are important. First, we rally the private sector together at a critical mass to drive changes. We do that for food, for fashion, and for tourism and travel for the built environment. We get these whole value chains together collectively; they become more courageous; and we move them forward.

Second, not surprisingly, is finance. You need to get money to flow in the right direction, implementing the SDGs, at least three to five trillion dollars a year. Governments do not have that so you need to channel the private sector in that direction, and that is sometimes easier said than done. So, we have created quite a lot of funds and are looking at the impact at quite a different level.

And then the last and most important thing is what you do here: education. I admire what the AIB Fellows and all AIB members are doing because the most unselfish gift of leadership is actually to give the gift of knowledge to people. You have the profession of giving, of investing in others, of ensuring that they are better off than they otherwise would be. And you do that unselfishly because, you know, it is also in your own interest ultimately to do that.

Education for me is important. I was happy to be born in the Netherlands. I always call that "the lottery ticket of life" because the Dutch government paid for my education. If that had not been the case – which is not for 95% of people in the world – I would not be standing here.

At the end of the day, education is the most powerful weapon. We know that more educated populations are more peaceful and are economically more developed. And that goes especially to providing education for girls and women, which is goal number four of the Sustainable Development Goals ("ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all"). To some extent I had the pleasure to help develop these goals, which underpins many of the things we are discussing today.

[LE]: You say we are "at the most dangerous moment for humanity." What do you mean by that? What is the downside? What do we need?

[PP]: I think that we are at the most dangerous moment for humanity because there is a certain sense, a false sense I may call it, of complacency. I talk to a lot of CEOs and they say, "Look, my predecessor did this. I do this. Look at the curve. You read the sustainability reports, 95 percent of companies now issue them." But the reality is, while we are bending the curve like this, the issues that we are creating with our linear extractive production model are being created at a faster level than the solutions that we apply. Climate change this decade needs to go down by 45 percent in terms of CO2 emissions. We are actually going up 14 percent in plastics, and every company talks about recycling. The false sense of complacency is a real problem.

We are making a documentary on plastics to create a little bit more awareness. People will tell you there is more recycling in plastics than before. That is true because the consumption of plastics has increased four-fold in the last three decades. But the total recycling of plastics has stayed at eight percent. There are more plastics in weight in this world already than the combined mass of living animals! Soon we will be in the oceans with a combined mass of plastics that well exceeds the fish, which we are working hard on extinguishing anyway.

So, there is a false sense of security. So many companies are setting targets but the targets are not good enough. Or there is a gap between the targets and the realities. Or the full understanding of looking at an exponential problem with linear thinking has not been internalized.

Of course, there are other reasons for self-interest, apathy, or whatever you want to call it. But these are the major hurdles. They are actually human hurdles. They are not technological hurdles. So, we need to have a higher level of consciousness here of what is needed and a higher sense of awareness that we need to move with increased speed and scale to address these issues.

I will not bother you too much with statistics but the whole world is talking about carbon. Like Moore's Law, you have a Carbon Law that is very simple. Every 10 years you have to go down in emissions by 50 percent. If you do that between now and 2050, then the world will stay at one and a half degrees. That is the premise of the climate agreements in Paris and many other things.

Now, here is the reality that will soon come out. This is an estimate we made based on science and data that we have now. The reality is now different. The first thing is, as I have said, we have not gone down 45 percent this decade. We are going up 14.5 percent. The second thing is that Mother Earth has been in overdrive, but she is losing her appetite to do that. She has actually taken 45 percent of our excess carbon emissions and compensated for that with her oceans, forests, and land. But Mother Earth is running out of capacity. So, all of a sudden, we are seeing negative tipping points. The Amazon is 15-20 percent away from becoming a carbon emitter. The Arctic and Antarctic are starting to melt, causing melting permafrost that has been stopping methane from coming free. These negative feedback loops that we are now seeing are accelerating.

We need leaders who have the courage to say, I do not know how to get there. I need to work in partnership with civil society, with academics, with governments to drive the changes that are needed. Leaders who will expose themselves, deal with uncomfortable truths, and get other opinions. I can tell you that anytime I did that, we came out in a better spot. That is what courageous leaders are.

So, what is the transformation that we need in our stock? We need to move, in simple terms, from a fossil fuel economy to what has become a data economy. Certainly, that is the case if you look where value creation is in the stock market this year. We now need to move to a biodiversity economy. If we do not live in line more with nature, with other living systems, we will be the ones who go extinct.

This is not a matter, by the way, of saving the wealth. That is a ridiculous notion. In fact, if the world had one choice, it would choose today to not have us there. It would take 150 years for the earth to come back to a wonderful state.

What courage also requires is a change in the philosophy of hiring and running businesses. Most CEOs want to run a responsible business. They probably want to move from a responsible business to a resilient business. I would argue, though, that the only business model that ultimately will survive is a regenerative business model.

We have to move from what we would call output-driven GDP models to impact-driven models, redefining what success looks like as overall wellbeing. We have talked about climate change, we have talked about food security, we have talked about deforestation as if these are the biggest issues that we need to solve. I would end by simply saying, no, these are not the biggest issues at all. They are actually symptoms of a bigger issue. The bigger issue at the end of the day is greed, apathy, selfishness. The 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Wangari Maathai[1] said it very well when she said, "In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."

[LE]: Why do you argue that business and government leaders need to face grand challenges head on? Why can we not continue "muddling through" making incremental changes?

[PP]: The reason is that incremental changes, in my opinion, do not work anymore. The bigger challenge that we face is how to change the systems in which we operate currently. Our economic system that we developed at a time when Mother Earth was able to compensate for a lot of our shortcomings, is what we now call a "linear extractive model" where we are focused on output instead of impact. We treat the world's resources – its natural resources, human resources, environmental resources - as if there is an abundance of them and that is obviously not true anymore. I think this puts a lot of economic theory on its head and that is why we are struggling, because we just do not know how to deal with these challenges.

I was in Glasgow about three weeks ago, giving the inaugural lecture on Adam Smith. Everybody talks about Adam Smith's invisible hand. Libertarians and liberal thinkers in politics have seized upon this and think that is where all the answers are.

First of all, this is not what Adam Smith wrote about and it is not what he would be writing about today. What people misunderstood is that 17 years before Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, he wrote a book that appears to have been forgotten: *The Theory of Moral Sentiment*. And moral

1 https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2004/maathai/lecture/

sentiment matters. We cannot build and run these businesses. We cannot be part of the changes in society without a certain level of moral sentiment.

The earth is 4.3 billion years old and it is a wonderful earth. To make this simple, put the age of the earth on a scale of 43 years. In those 43 years, human beings have only been around for four hours. The Industrial Revolution only started one minute ago, and in that one minute, we have cut down half the world's forests. Over the last 50 years we have lost about 70 percent of the world's species - mammals, vertebrates, and amphibians....

The Wealth Meteorological Institute came out yesterday and said July 4th may have been the earth's hottest day on record. We are seeing so many more natural disasters now. There were about a 100 natural disasters per year in the 1980s; we are now running on average 1,500 per year. That is 15 times higher, which means significantly more incidents and many more people suffering. One third of Pakistan, the size of a country like Great Britain, was under water not long ago. We are already close to having 200 million climate refugees and the number will reach one billion by the end of the decade with the way things are progressing.

The pressures that you see, the inflationary storms that business has to deal with, the political meltdowns that politicians have to deal with - I think there is a new economic hurricane coming at us, which is this environmental challenge. How can we live within these planetary boundaries?

COVID was a pause. Sometimes it is a good thing to pause.... I think we started to realize for the first time that we could not have infinite growth on a finite planet. We started to realize for the first time that many things in this world are actually linked; in fact, everything is linked. We all of a sudden saw that COVID, a zoonotic disease, is the direct result of destruction of biodiversity. We saw that the poorer people in the world suffered disproportionately from COVID; that COVID had a racial dimension and an economic dimension. All of a sudden, we started to realize that everything was linked and that if we work on one thing, we must work on all things... and that is what we call systems change.

People started to realize not only that our economic system was not working anymore but also that we did not want to return to where we were pre-COVID. In fact, 95 percent of the CEOs, if you were to ask them today, do not want to return to where we were before COVID. So, we have a choice right now. It is a more difficult choice that we have to make, but we still have a choice.

Either we can go on as business as usual, which is basically what we are doing right now... or we have an opportunity to rise to our challenges to say there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for humanity to save humanity. I want to be part of that. I do not want to leave more debt to future generations.

[LE]: Where are we now – business, government and academia – in addressing these grand challenges? Is there any good news?

[PP]: The good news is we ARE moving. I always say to people (and soon I cannot say this anymore because electric vehicles are growing fast), that if you are in first or second gear in a car, it is much easier to go to third or fourth gear and accelerate than if you were to go in reverse. We are in second gear. A lot of things have happened. I have been at this game for the last 15 to 20 years at least with a high level of consciousness. We have probably achieved more in the last two to three years that I would argue in the previous 15 years. So that is positive news.

We see companies moving. We now have 4,000 companies making $38 trillion in science-based commitments to decarbonize their portfolios.

We have governments moving. If you look at the legislation that is coming out, the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States, the European Green Deal, 14 Five-Year Plans in China, the International Sustainability Standards Board (and I could go on), we have now 91 percent of emissions offered by countries that have made Net Zero commitments.

We see the financial markets moving. Sixty percent of assets under management (roughly $70 trillion) have committed to decarbonizing their portfolios.

I think the biggest change we are seeing is from employees. I just ran a study with one of my foundations, which I called Conscious Quitting. We interviewed 4,000 people and found that employees now want to work for companies that do more than paying them salaries. They want to work with companies that have values that make a difference, which make this a better world, and employees are now willing to speak up or walk out. This is a tremendous force of change.

We are seeing tipping points. I was just reading yesterday that 43 percent of Americans (and I love them; I have been married to one for 43 years, so I do have the right to criticize them from time to time) want to buy an electric vehicle in the next two years. In fact, if I had been standing here two years ago, we would all have been skeptical of the car sales because only four percent were electric vehicles. At the end of this year, it is now 22 percent, which is being held back by our capacity to produce because we are all surprised by the slowness of adapting our infrastructures. This certainly is a tipping point.

Solar panel sales are up 60 percent this year. With solar panels we are on the trajectory to one and a half degrees. If everything changed at the same speed as solar panels, heat pumps would now have replaced gas boilers.

I could go on but there are many areas that are tipping points. That is not a moment of despair. We have the tools to do it. We have the financial means to do it. We have the technology to do it. If you hear people tell you it cannot be done, they are living on another planet - 80 percent of the challenges that we face today can be solved today. And it is actually even more profitable if we solve the problem because it gets to the essence of our existence. Business cannot succeed in societies that fail by 20 percent. A little bit more technology, hydrogen costs coming down a little bit faster, for example, would get you to sustainable airline fuel a little bit faster. With a little bit of creativity, I am sure we will have the answers as well.

[LE]: What role do/can/should business schools and universities play here? What advice do you have for us as faculty and members of the Academy of International Business?

[PP]: We all need to get into overdrive, including academic institutions, which are actually still among the most trusted institutions in the world. Politicians and some businesspeople are trying to play with science right now, trying to move the boundaries of morality by fake news. We will never build that trust or that confidence that we need in society to attack these issues if we give up on the clear notion that we need to be driven by science.

Your role is much more important than publishing and, frankly, publishing you do not do so well. If I may be honest, your incentive system is to publish in journals that nobody reads in a language that nobody understands, trying to solve solutions that often do not have a problem in the first place. We need you to become human again, to speak my language, so that my grandchild can understand it and become part of that solution. Be focused on impact. It is the only thing that counts right now.

Academics have a role to play in advocacy. We now have the European law we are working on, the nature restoration law. It is not going so well because many people in business and politics are pushing back over-regulation with arguments like, "We should keep cutting the forest; otherwise, the farmer will not exist." But academics are giving us these boundaries; they are talking about what this planet can support. You need to speak up and be in an advocacy role, which is very powerful. What if we had 6,000 academics write a letter to Brussels – what a difference advocacy can make!

You also need to put sustainability at the core of what you do. I am not talking about companies not engaging in greenwashing or cosmetic things, or celebrating one thing and then doing others that are not right. You know, sustainability can be a side hobby, it can be like CSR. Even in our universities, CSR is a side hobby where you can sign up for an elective called sustainability. You need to make that the core of your education.

We do not have time now. Academics have two opportunities to jump the curve of time. The first opportunity is your alumni network so get into them because they are a very profitable network for your universities anyway. Educate them; leverage them. That is a very important tool: shake them up, shake them loose, and shape them to a higher level. The second is executive education. Deal only with the right companies because the right companies will force you to change anyway. But use the opportunities that you have in executive education to also accelerate the pace of changing companies. Do not cater to the tunes of what the CEO says; have the courage to offer the products these companies need.

AIB is an incredible network. Having 3,500 members in 90 countries, representing the world, if you rally together and use that as a force for good, not only to learn and share best practices but together to create something that is bigger than each of us individually can do, then, I think that you have it within your powers to change the course of humanity. It is that big of a mission. We need courageous leaders – in academia, business and government - who will take up the grand challenge of making a better world.

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