

Purpose, Attraction & Retention.

How Purpose - Driven Leaders Turn Theory Into Action

Madeline McCartney from our partner firm in Paris, Progress Associés, is a specialist Executive Search Consultant in Consumer & Retail, Industry, and Technology sectors. Madeline recently moderated two panels on the role of purpose in attracting and retaining talent. The panelists represented different generations, backgrounds, and experiences, including leaders of purpose-driven companies and young talent seeking concrete commitments from their employers. Here's what she learned.

Purpose-driven businesses: why and how?

When it comes to purpose and profit, it's not either/or. It's both/and. The idea that you must sacrifice performance to achieve positive social impact has rightly been discredited. In fact, pursuing social impact goals can lead to better products and higher revenues.

That is not to say it's easy. Many difficult decisions are needed to deliver impactful results and meet stakeholder expectations. Think of retail organisations that must vet and redesign entire supply chains. Yet investments upfront in sustainability can pay dividends in consumer loyalty and other key impact metrics.

That is why tracking success is so crucial to every purpose-driven business. Leaders need to go beyond traditional KPIs (turnover, EBITDA, etc.) and consider extra-financial impacts such as social and environmental impact, job creation, and source of materials. These metrics should be monitored together and presented as equally important in the company's results.

Transformations with real impact

When thinking about transforming your business, be sure to place purpose in by-laws and governance structures, not just as an add-on or a separate component. It has to be deeply woven into the fabric of your organisation.

Ambitious and action-oriented leaders must support the transformation program from the top with transparent communication and concrete projects that turn goals into reality. It's not enough to have a mission statement or vague proclamations. You must bring everyone in the company along on the journey, and actions and results must be real and felt daily.

Case study: Camif boycotts Black Friday

A great example of an organisation putting purpose into action is when French furniture e-retailer Camif decided to boycott Black Friday, asking their community to "not to give in to the siren songs of (over) consumption!"

Many thought they were making a colossal mistake by giving up a significant revenue opportunity. But ultimately, the bold statement boosted Camif's brand and cemented its image as a company that "walks the walk." Over the years, the campaign transformed into a formidable movement, and many organisations have made similar pledges.

Bringing this kind of action to fruition and truly living your organisation's values requires several key traits and skills from leaders. Let's look at what those are.

Key characteristics of a purpose-driven leader:

- **Integrity:** alignment between who you are and what you do.

- **Ambitious:** a clear vision for the future and the drive to pursue it.
- **Strategic:** a long-term outlook and resilience to short-term pressures.
- **Persuasive:** the ability to convince stakeholders, shareholders, employees, etc.
- **Knowledgeable:** a strong foundation of the 'how,' not just the 'why.'
- **Courageous:** bravery and perseverance to drive forward unpopular or unexpected ideas.

These characteristics can be cultivated in employees with learning and development programs and value-driven internal communications. Yet the most powerful source is demonstrative leadership that embeds these characteristics into your company culture.

Attracting and retaining talent

Clear purpose and concrete commitments are valuable assets for attracting and retaining talent. This is especially true for career starters trying to find companies aligned with their personal beliefs and convictions. But it is not just young people trying to make the world a better place and have an impact.

Senior leaders are also seeking more meaning in their work — a trend that has accelerated after the pandemic had people reconsidering and recommitting to their deepest motivations.

We also heard from many leaders encouraged by their children or younger employees to proactively contribute to social and environmental goals.

However, being purpose-driven is not just about a single cause. It is a sense of well-being, engagement, and empowerment in your job. And with transparent and authentic leadership, the organisation builds a sense of belonging throughout its workforce.

People may join a company for its purpose, but they stay for the people.

Be sure to consider the entire employee experience and remember the basics: offer high-quality work and interesting challenges, ensure the first line of management is supportive and empowering, and develop new ways of working together and learning from each other. Reverse mentoring, co-management, and participatory leadership are all ways to ensure that knowledge and power are shared.

Regarding talent attraction, when your organisation follows this purpose-driven blueprint, it will shine through when candidates have conversations with your employees. It also takes a concerted effort to package and communicate your values and impact to ensure they resonate at every step of the recruitment journey.

Our final takeaway: bring in outside voices

Like we did during our panels, bring in external sources to share their knowledge and experiences to help your organisation evolve.

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