

How We Walk The Talk: Senior Leader Virtual Roundtable

Insights from INvolve, Principia and Interbrand's Roundtable on

Wednesday 21 June

Following the release of **The Ethics Study 2023**, we brought together senior leaders to discuss how we walk the talk by activating purpose and values and living what our brands stand for. Senior leaders had the opportunity to share their insights on aligning purpose and values, discuss some of the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating ethics in business, and share best practice and strategies on how to create ethical and purposeful organizations.



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Key Takeaways

Activating ethics

Purpose and ethics are more than marketing and communications tools. Businesses need to create strong frameworks to activate and embed their commitments, complete with benchmarks for progress to underpin initiatives and targets for change. The accountability for ethics lies with the C-Suite and Board, but to ensure real integration, ambitions must also be activated and instilled at a middle management level, guaranteeing that aspirations on ethics are translated into business priorities.

The art of clarity

Particularly for big companies, business leaders need to focus on the clarity of their commitments. This must be done through focusing on what a business stands for rather than what it stands against, which then provides direction on which societal issues a company feels most comfortable speaking out on. Ultimately, companies may always face a backlash when expressing support for certain issues, but by ensuring that they remain steadfast and consistent in their purpose this can be overcome.

Needing to be bold

Often, businesses hold back when it comes to communicating their position on ethics, especially if they don't have the body of evidence that ensure their bold stances translate to commercial advantage. However, business leaders should reframe the narrative that being vocal on social issues is detrimental; instead, leaders are clear that staying quiet on important matters has implications upon a business too.

DEI is good business sense

As the economic and political climate remains challenging, businesses need to be leaning into and investing in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), rather than deprioritizing it. Especially from a recruitment and retention perspective, organizations that work on honing their policies and strategies are more likely to attract and keep talent rather than those who treat DEI as an afterthought.

Collaboration is key

Organizations seem reticent to be “the first” when it comes to vocalizing support for a specific issue and exhibit a real hesitancy in leading the way. Cross-sector and industry collaboration could prove useful to create strength in numbers when it comes to societal issues. Leading global companies are in a powerful position to advocate for the importance of ethics in business, and together can turn the tide towards increasing awareness and action.

Translating ethics and DEI to innovation

Ethics and DEI should be viewed as facets of innovation and a company’s overall willingness to improve and refine their processes. Whether collaborating with other organizations or creating goals within an individual workplace or department, treating both as an evolving process ensures that targets and ambitious goals remain top of mind.

Reflections

Rob Hayward

What struck me most in our conversation was the degree of openness on display. There was a time when senior leaders were hesitant to speak openly about issues of ethics and integrity, often relying on scripted talking points that had clearly benefitted from the close attention of in-house lawyers.

But business leaders are clearly beginning to embrace a broader role in society and accept the moral and ethical responsibilities that come with the growing power of their companies in meeting some of the world’s most significant challenges.

In keeping with this spirit of openness, our discussion focussed on some of the areas where leaders see the greatest challenges in translating aspiration into action across their companies. Whether in equipping leaders to respond to geopolitical volatility, or in building the mechanisms to track the health of ethical culture, participants were clear-eyed about the need to close the “ethics gap” between ambitious commitments and the realities of day-to-day operations.

Perhaps the most heartening aspect of the discussion was leaders’ belief that, in order to make real progress on global challenges, they must collaborate across sectors and share learnings on how to tackle ethical issues most effectively. In their minds, engaging in ethics is simply not a search for differentiation and competitive advantage, but a collective endeavour that can transform their industries for the good of stakeholders and society.

Emma Ellis

It was great to see so many enthusiastic leaders, from across the globe, knowledge sharing and coming together to unpick some of the challenges of driving ethics in business, all while attesting to its importance.

Some of the conversations within my group focused on matrix decision making, and how businesses can align singular ethical standpoints when there are different perspectives, and expectations around ethics, when it come to parent companies or clients. While there is no one-size-fits-all recommendation, discussions around navigating expectations and balancing the needs of different stakeholders, clients and companies was enlightening.

It was great to hear the enthusiasm around diversity and the need to lean in further when times get tough, rather than falling into the trap of de-prioritizing inclusion when it's most needed. From an ethics perspective, and as our companies become more global, are even more scrutinized and therefore accountable, DEI and ethics remain hand in hand.

There was a real sense of urgency when it comes to driving ethics, and the group's discussions around protecting the integrity of a brand whilst still making the right decisions at the speed required, were a great insight into understanding the nature of ethics within a business and the real impetus to get things right.

Suki Sandhu

The level of conversation within my group was strong and it was great to see senior leaders invested in troubleshooting some of the very real challenges of driving ethics and, also committing to goals on how they could improve their own organization. The space was open and honest and led to some really meaningful discussions on the topic.

Ultimately, it's easy to see and implement ethical standards and aspirations at a top level, however it is underpinned by organizational culture and whether those standards are implemented across every level of management and decision making. The group was cognizant of this and focused on elevating middle managers and leaders across a business to become more mindful of and keep ethics top of mind. Additionally, we know that diversity, especially leadership diversity, plays a critical role here as diverse teams are more likely to effectively challenge decision making and avoid group think, a danger to a business' innovation and growth.

When it comes to change itself, business leaders need to band together, because an individual can make every commitment for change but without the support, enablement and buy-in of other senior leaders, efforts for change can be undermined and can ultimately undo all the good work being done, or being promised.

Download the Ethics Study

Thank you for attending our Senior Virtual Roundtable to discuss and share best practice on ethics in business. You can find The Ethics Study 2023 [here](#) to download.

Get in touch

PRINCIPIA

Principia is the leading specialist advisor on organizational ethics. We are trusted by the world's largest and most complex organizations – from Silicon Valley tech majors to global banking groups and international development agencies – to guide them through their most sensitive challenges and shape the critical components of the ethical organization.

Interbrand

Forging iconic moves for brands through strategy and creativity, Interbrand was founded in 1979 and in the last 40 years has created some of the world's most powerful and enduring brands. If you are using WiFi now, we created the name and symbol. Or maybe you're reading this on your Microsoft Surface, another brand we created and named.

Perhaps you're drinking coffee delivered by Ocado, that's another Interbrand creation... the list goes on. When we think about brands, we think about creating icons. Brands that disrupt, win in their markets and stand the test of time. Brands become iconic when they make big moves in their category, when they change customer's expectations forever and de-position their competition in the process. That's what we are about. Creating iconic brands and the Iconic Moves™ that enable them to change the game.

involve

the inclusion people

INvolve is a consultancy and global network that enables leaders and change makers to build more successful and empowering organisations where everyone can thrive. Founded in 2013 by Suki Sandhu OBE, a globally recognised expert in talent, diversity and inclusion, INvolve transforms workplaces and mindsets through the delivery of programs, thought leadership and advisory solutions to help firms drive cultural change.