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Arto O. Salonen
University of Eastern Finland

Tanja Vesala-Varttala
Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences

In Search of a Common Language among Stakeholders

Abstract

In industrialized societies, people are increasingly drawn toward improving their quality of life instead of raising their standard of living. Drawing on this shift of values, we argue that a sustainable future can be significantly impacted by purpose-driven collaboration among businesses and their stakeholders. Purpose-driven business can be a pathway to progress in the Era of Anthropocene, which sees humans as the dominant force of change on Earth. There is a need to develop a common language to help businesses and stakeholders collaborate efficiently in sustainability transition. The more we learn to share our values, negotiate goals, and communicate our purposes, the better equipped we are for combatting the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and depletion of natural resources. Based on our analysis, purpose-driven business has a solid ethical base and potential to benefit employees, customers, other stakeholders, society, and sustainability transition overall on local and global levels. By offering stakeholders opportunities to do meaningful work with a purpose, businesses can improve employee experience, create shared value, and build hope for the future. Winners develop solutions in the front line. Others will follow, as the problems humankind faces are capable of challenging human existence on Earth.

Keywords: materialism, post-materialism, sustainability transition, purpose, shared value, meaningful work, employee experience

1 Changing ideals of a good life

In recent decades, aiming for a continuous increase in wealth has been a typical way of striving for a good life especially in industrial societies. Improving citizens' standard of living has been seen as a measure for progress. The belief in continuous economic growth and an ever-increasing standard of living is linked to consumerism and its pursuit of well-being through consumption. Consumption keeps the wheels of society turning: when people consume, the economy grows, and as the economy grows, people have a higher standard of living.

Nowadays, due to population growth, increased mass consumption, and an individualistic way of life, the effects caused by humans on the future of Earth are greater than the forces of nature. The transition to a new geological era – from Holocene to Anthropocene – tells us that we humans are living on a finite planet (Folke et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2020). The total weight of everything made by humans exceeds the mass of all living things on Earth (Elhacham et al., 2020), and human made microplastics have spread all over the world (Zalasiewicz et al., 2016). Furthermore, the adverse consequences of human activities can be seen, for example, in the form of forest fires, pandemics, and floods (Lewis & Maslin, 2015).

As humans are the dominant force of change on the planet, there is a need for a worldwide transition toward sustainable lifestyles and societal structures (Crutzen, 2002; Lewis & Maslin, 2015). The climate crisis we are now witnessing is the first human-induced climate change. Equally man-made is the current sixth wave of mass extinction. Besides the climate change and loss of species, the rapid depletion of natural resources is also a sign of humankind's unsustainable pursuit of well-being. (Caldeira, 2012; Huber & Knutti, 2012; Barnosky et al., 2012.) It is promising that especially in industrialized societies people are increasingly drawn toward improving their quality of life instead of raising their standard of living.

The changing priorities of citizens suggest that the traditional link between economic growth and well-being has started to weaken (Esterling, 1995). The ongoing “silent revolution” (Inglehart, 1977) from materialism to post-materialism (Inglehart, 1997) means that people are transforming their way of living from a sense of “having” to “loving and being” (Allardt, 1975; see also Diener & Seligman, 2004). Citizens’ values are changing fast in countries where people grow up in conditions that permit them to take survival for granted (Inglehart, 2008).

The growing focus on post-material values in industrial societies directs attention to issues such as interpersonal trust, life satisfaction, and meaning of life. Such experiences of subjective well-being include joy for life, aesthetic experiences, a sense of belonging, increased understanding, and enjoyment drawn from one's creativity in life. One person can experience an increase in quality of life by walking in nature, another through art, and yet another through doing volunteer work. For some, religion brings peace of mind. (Boyle et al., 2008; Inglehart, 2018.) The reasoning behind everyday choices is no longer the same as before because perceptions of well-being have changed. This transformation builds on altruism, dedication, ties to other people and society, egolessness, and self-transcendence (Maslow, 2011).

Fundamental changes from materialism to post-materialism could lead the way to sustainability transition whereby sustainable society and ways of life gradually replace unsustainable society and ways of life (Table 1). Such transition would manifest itself across all sectors of society as a redefinition of lifestyles, work cultures, and organizational purposes, bringing about changes in what we produce, consume, sell, design, and build (Salonen et al., 2014). It would also affect our modes of transport and our sources of food (Höysniemi & Salonen, 2019; Salonen & Helne, 2017) and change what is learned in schools (Lehtonen et al., 2018). In other words, sustainability transition requires an overall systemic change.

Table 1. Sustainability transition from materialism towards post-materialism (Salonen, 2019; Salonen & Åhlberg, 2013)

	MATERIALISM	POST-MATERIALISM
Measure of progress	Economic growth	Well-being
Perception of a good life	Standard of living	Quality of life
Energy	Fossil energy	Clean energy
Natural resources	Linear economy (cradle to grave)	Circular economy (cradle to cradle)
Consuming priority	Products	Services

A human being is not detached from nature but part of it. The Earth is a closed system in terms of natural resources. All the material resources that humankind needs are taken from nature and returned to nature - the only resource coming from outside Earth is sunlight. (Capra & Luigi Luisi, 2014.) Therefore, the word “waste” is becoming obsolete during sustainability transition. There is no room for waste because humanity does not yet have another planet to compensate for the depletion of natural resources. A rapid transition from linear economy to circular economy is therefore paramount to gaining mutual benefits. In the end, taking care of the vitality of nature is a matter of survival for humankind (Salonen & Konkka, 2015).

Even though business organizations have significant power and resources to combat climate change, biodiversity loss, and the depletion of natural resources, progress is often slow and concepts such as ‘purpose-driven business’ and ‘shared value creation’ may sound like empty buzzwords to stakeholders. If the purpose for an organization's existence is narrow, for example, only to generate profit, employees may begin to feel like a commodity. Moreover, if economic growth is seen as a key societal goal, citizens may think their personal purpose in life is, or should be, aligned with that goal. If an organization does not recognize its purpose in a changing society, it is a “sunset organization” whose attractiveness may wane in the eyes of employees and other stakeholders. Working for an organization without a clearly defined purpose could even be perceived as insignificant and worthless. To avoid such a negative employee experience of doing meaningless work, it is necessary to identify the purpose of the organization's existence. (Martikainen, 2022.)

An organization can have several purposes that are the reasons for its existence. There are pioneering “sunrise organizations” that have learned to take into account ongoing social changes and invest in their potential to drive corresponding changes in their organizational culture. The purposes of an organization can be identified by observing the connections that the organization with its products, services, and people have to society and the world around them. The value created by an organization multiplies through these different connections and their combinations. This wider recognition and definition of organizational purpose emphasizes the importance of meaningful work and positive employee experience. (Salonen & Tapani, 2021.)

In order to manage groundbreaking changes and improve the connections between organizations and the world around them, we must work hard to develop shared understanding and trust among businesses and their stakeholders (Miyayaga, 2022). We need a common language geared towards a sustainable future. To support organizations and stakeholders in their collaboration towards sustainability transition, it is important to gain empirical insight into how different internal and external stakeholders such as clients, employees, leaders and managers, owners, investors, various collaboration

partners, and policy and decision makers currently conceptualize their role and view their practical possibilities as contributors to a sustainable future.

In the present research, we are interested in knowing how we can build a common language for supporting sustainability transition from materialism to post-materialism. Our assumption is that progress in such a sustainability transition can be achieved through developing forms of shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and purpose-driven collaboration between business organizations and all their diverse stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2004). At its core, our research objective stems from perceived challenges in combating climate change and preventing its irreversible adverse effects to the planet and human life as we know it.

2 Interviews and qualitative content analysis of data

To investigate the current understanding that stakeholder groups have about taking part in sustainability transition, the following overlapping themes were discussed with three interviewees [I1-3] who have a long-standing (over 20 years) and wide-ranging experience in strategic collaboration with both business and non-profit organizations and their stakeholders, representing diverse industries and fields:

1. Meaningful work: What kind of conceptions exist concerning meaningful work?
2. Positive employee experience: How can organizations and their stakeholders contribute to a positive employee experience?
3. Shared value: How is shared value understood, implemented, and communicated among stakeholders?
4. Purpose: How is purpose understood, implemented, and communicated among stakeholders?

The interviewees currently work, and have worked in the past, in top leadership positions in prominent Finland-based, but internationally operating, organizations. Among themselves, they have expertise in strategic marketing, communication, HR, business development, investor relations, and sustainability planning and operations. In their current jobs, the interviewees held these job titles: Chief Communications Officer and Sustainability Manager, Chief HR Officer, and Executive Director.

The interview themes were selected based on the researchers' interest in studying sustainability transition from the point of view of value transformation from materialism towards post-materialism. The interviewees found that the themes discussed were timely and relevant, and they felt willing and comfortable sharing them with their colleagues to multiply insights and disseminate results and findings of the current research.

The interview themes were operationalized by creating 3-5 specific interview questions pertaining to each theme. The questions were sent to the interviewees in advance, so that they had time to consider their answers before the interview. Many of the questions required complex thinking and insight, and it was deemed likely that the informants did not have everyday experience in analyzing the issues raised and verbalizing their thoughts. Receiving the questions beforehand helped them prepare and relax for the interview. To get a comprehensive view, the interviewees were encouraged to share both their systemic knowledge and understanding and their practical experiences with focus on everyday words and actions.

The interviews were conducted face to face (one in-person and two via a video-conferencing platform) in August 2022, resulting in more than four hours of recorded interview data. During the interview sessions (of 60 to 90 minutes), the informants managed to cover the issues raised from multiple perspectives, comparing and contrasting their current and past experiences from diverse organizations and stakeholder groups. They were able to critically analyze their understanding and experiences from both systemic and operational points of view, offering several practical examples of everyday business interactions to substantiate their systemic reflections.

The research hypothesis was that there is a need to build a common language in order for businesses and their stakeholders to be able to collaborate more efficiently towards sustainability transition in society. This hypothesis was not communicated directly to the informants before or during the interview sessions. Regardless, all the interviewees brought up, spontaneously, repeatedly, and from many angles, their experiences, opinions, thoughts, and practical examples related to the need to develop communication and increase shared understanding between stakeholders in various everyday encounters and situations.

The interview data was transcribed and analyzed by coding, categorizing, and grouping content according to the research aims and themes, looking for meaningful trends and patterns. According to principles of qualitative content analysis the

similarities and differences in perceptions and experiences by different interviewees were mapped and tabled, along with illustrative quotes from the data. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Elo & Kynäs, 2008.)

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, as it was the participants' native language and because the topics covered required the ability to describe and demonstrate complex issues in detail. For this article, the direct quotations from the data were translated by one of the authors, who is an officially authorized translator from Finnish into English.

3 Building a common language for collaboration

All in all, the interviews brought up how important it is for all relevant stakeholders to have an active contributor role when it comes to defining common goals and building a shared understanding of purpose. Stakeholders need to take time and find space to establish a common language with which to plan, implement and evaluate purpose-driven actions. It is of vital importance to think and talk things through, define values and goals, establish success criteria, exchange alternative views and opinions, share knowledge and understanding, explain and justify decisions, ask questions, give and receive feedback and feedforward, study audience needs to find skilled ways to address and convince different types of stakeholders, and so on. Stakeholder interaction, on a human-to-human level, is a prerequisite for sustainable change.

In what follows, we will first provide a general summary of the interview results theme by theme (Table 2), followed by a more detailed report of key results. We will look into all thematic sub-categories arising from our qualitative data by providing an interpretative summary of key messages with illustrative examples. Direct quotations from the data mainly work to illustrate how the informants view the needs, challenges, and possibilities of enhanced interaction between businesses and stakeholders in order to foster sustainable development goals through purpose-driven business and stakeholder collaboration.

Table 2. Interview themes and thematic sub-categories of content abstracted from data

Interview theme	Sub-category
1. Meaningful work	Self-knowledge Possibility to learn Connectedness Added value to others Trust through interaction
2. Positive employee experience	Value alignment Human to human approach Employer Value Proposition (EVP) Spaces for interaction Shared drive and passion
3. Shared value	Balanced sustainability Insight into decision-making Transparent criteria for success Open and honest communication Skills to address stakeholder groups with respect and sensitivity
4. Purpose	External policies Value-based ambition Intrinsic motivation Purposeful investment into the future Wide and long-term impact

The interviewees were relatively at ease when talking about 'meaningful work' and 'employee experience', while the concepts and manifestations of 'purpose' and 'shared value' were found more difficult to define and illustrate with examples. As our informants have a long and wide-ranging experience and expertise in strategic business development, they were skilled at analyzing phenomena and expressing their views despite the lack of established vocabulary or shared ways of communication. It is likely, however, that not all stakeholders are equally equipped for exploring and conceptualizing these issues or sharing their views. That is why we need more insight into how purpose and shared value are understood, implemented and communicated at the moment and how we can support businesses and their stakeholders to build a common language to further sustainable development goals.

Next, we will present the key interview results in more detail. Based on these results, the Discussion and Recommendations section of this article will offer development suggestions for enhancing stakeholder interaction and communication to foster purpose-driven environments and initiatives among businesses and their stakeholders.

3.1 *What makes work meaningful*

Michaelson (2021) approaches the concept of meaningful work from three perspectives: subjective (meaningful to me), social (meaningful to others), and normative (meaningful to me and to others but also meaningful independently). Subjective accounts refer to personal feelings of satisfaction and a sense of doing something meaningful. Social accounts define meaningful work as “purposeful activity that is perceived by others to be socially worthwhile” in some way (p. 419). In addition to these two perspectives, Michaelson argues that we also need a normative account that approaches meaningful work from a systemic point of view.

While all three perspectives are valid, the normative approach provides tools to better exchange views and make decisions about what is meaningful and significant for individuals, organizations, societies, and the planet as a systemic whole. Approaching work from all these perspectives makes it easier for organizations and their stakeholders to “facilitate meaningfulness at work” (Michaelson et al., 2014), helping them communicate, build trust, and engage in CSR and sustainability initiatives together (see also Burton & Dunn, 2005). Such facilitation is especially important in times of changing values and increasingly challenging planetary conditions in the era of Anthropocene (Folke et al., 2021).

All the interviewees felt that the sense of doing meaningful work is based on critical self-analysis and self-knowledge. It is eventually up to each individual to find out what they can do and want to achieve, for what purpose, and with whom. According to the interviewees, it is only after you know yourself that you can share your needs with others and make decisions as to whether your work feels meaningful to you or not.

“You need to know and define your values to be able to consider how your work goals align with your personal purpose.” [I2]

Life-long learning and opportunities to grow were also seen as elements of meaningful work. Especially for people working in knowledge-intensive professions, it is important that organizations provide them with opportunities to develop their talents and achieve sustainable career progress. Connectedness between people was said to be at the core of meaningful work: people want to feel as part of a community of like-minded peers sharing similar values and purposes. Learning things together with others was seen as key to being able to change the world for the better through one’s work:

“Changing the world can simply mean that we learn new things together.” [I2]

According to the informants, meaningful work also needs to generate added value to someone. This is how it can be justified and its impact can be discussed and evaluated. Or the other way around: meaningless work was regarded as not being of any use to anyone and serving no justifiable purpose (e.g. communication for communication’s sake, such as a report that no one needs or uses for anything).

“Work can be a means to change the world if it makes people understand phenomena, the goals and justifications behind decisions, and the impacts of those decisions. This can help them change their own thinking and behavior.” [I1]

“In addition to reducing one’s own carbon footprint, it is important to find ways to help other people in reducing theirs. Nowadays we talk a lot about how businesses and stakeholders can contribute to ‘carbon handprint’ and help make a positive impact on others.” [I1]

Interviewees emphasized that building trust between people is vital if the aim is to change the world in collaboration with others. This requires constant interaction and negotiation, so that people know each other’s values and objectives and understand how they compare with larger frameworks of purposes, goals, and benefits. Identifying meaningful connections with higher-level goals helps unite stakeholders and motivates them into further collaboration.

All in all, the interviewees felt that it is important for organizations to openly define and discuss their values and purpose with all stakeholders. Although clients and investors are the two stakeholder groups that naturally receive emphasis in business organizations, the importance of building trust with employees was highlighted by all the interviewees, along with being sensitive and skilled in addressing different stakeholders to gain maximum impact.

“I believe that if CEOs were to spend even a little more time on discussions with employees, instead of devoting all that time to interacting with investors, we would see a significant improvement in results and impact.” [I1]

“You need to focus on each stakeholder’s respective needs and values, and have the patience and courage to build narratives that illustrate concrete actions, results, and long-term impacts from stakeholder perspectives.” [I3]

Business organizations benefit if their employees know and trust the organization’s purpose and feel that their job is meaningful. Finding ways to build a positive employee experience is therefore crucial for purpose-driven business organizations.

3.2 *What contributes to positive employee experience*

The concept of meaningful work is closely tied to employee experience, and it is useful to consider how organizations can contribute to creating favorable conditions for a positive employee experience (Martikainen, 2022). A positive employee experience can be based, for example, on a sense that one’s job is meaningful and valuable (Hackman & Oldman, 1980), that one is working towards a worthy cause (Yeoman, 2014), or that one’s work contributes towards having significance or purpose in life (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). According to Lips-Wiersma et al. (2020, p. 39), research on organizational purpose often emphasizes the importance of alignment between employees’ personal values and organizational values as a basis for a positive employee experience (see also Rosso et al., 2010). Furthermore, a positive employee experience may stem from a sense of benefiting others in ways that transcend not only the self but also the organization and extend to society and the environment (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). On an everyday level, a positive employee experience may be based, for example, on a sense of unity with others, an ability to express one’s full potential, a sense of personal integrity, and feeling inspired (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). A purpose-driven employee wants to feel that they are a valuable creature whose work positively impacts the work community, society, and the world at large (Bajer, 2016). By contrast, meaningless work perceived as futile nullifies a person’s sense of dignity.

The versatile connection between one’s work and the world outside provides a purpose for the employee. Experiences of joining, belonging, and being involved support everyday life. The collaborative power of a work community consists of complementary roles occupied by different people. When different interests and strengths are combined, the weaknesses of individuals disappear, as one person’s strength compensates for another’s weakness. Focusing on employee weaknesses does not support the vitality of an organization but rather works to undermine its attractiveness. Employees thrive in jobs where their uniqueness is accepted and they can offer their contribution without compression or coercion.

Being able to align one’s values with organizational values was seen as the basis for positive employee experience by all our interviewees. They also felt that employees are themselves ultimately responsible for ensuring that their work environment allows them to make decisions in line with their values. As one interviewee put it:

“If one’s work is not in alignment with one’s values, it may not be the most fruitful approach to try to change the work environment. It may be best to take things in one’s own hands and find an environment where it is possible to make a meaningful contribution.” [I2]

However, another interviewee felt that people should try to find tactful ways to take up issues and challenge established views in any work environment and with their supervisors:

“I believe that meaningful change can be achieved through negotiation and interaction with others. However, one needs to have a high self-esteem and a lot of confidence to be able to challenge ideas and bring up issues. But if you forget or compromise your personal purpose, it is easy for you to end up in burnout.” [I3]

“You also need to have a wider perspective to work and be prepared to develop your thinking and behavior in general. In workshops with our stakeholders, we came to the conclusion that key competencies in business, as well as in life, include transversal skills such as self-knowledge, interaction skills, critical thinking, and resilience, among other things.” [I3]

Our interviewees also felt that to have a positive employee experience, employees need to feel that they are seen and heard as human beings and not treated as faceless members of an organizational system or valued only through their performance or productivity. Such a human-to-human approach can be achieved through the kind of interaction which allows everyone, including leaders, to be themselves.

“You need to be able to feel that you are valuable as a human being and that leaders and colleagues approach you with openness and honesty. If this happens, you gain courage to contribute and make decisions autonomously.” [I3]

All the interviewees commented on ongoing changes in employees’ expectations concerning work-life balance. One interviewee [I2] had noticed that younger employees in particular tend to expect that employers consider, and provide support for, not just their well-being at work but their well-being in life. Another interviewee [I1] had observed that younger employees do not want to fill their life with work. Such changes in stakeholder expectations have motivated organizations to plan more holistic support structures, benefits, and models of job flexibility.

According to one interviewee [I2], taking time to define and discuss the organization’s Employer Value Proposition (EVP) can be helpful when assessing employee experience:

“Positive employee experience is based on a sense of alignment between the employer value proposition and an employee’s sense of how well that promise is realized on the level of everyday actions. If the employer invests in defining and discussing the EVP with employees, it is easier for them to consider how they feel and what their experience is like.” [I2]

The interviewee also pointed out that for an organization to have a positive impact on employee experience, it should identify “moments that matter” for employees (e.g. highs and lows of employment) and then create spaces of interaction where it is possible to analyze and discuss these moments in depth.

All the interviewees mentioned stakeholder workshops as an efficient means of building a shared understanding of diverse expectations and needs. One concrete example were value workshops which had participants from all employee groups and where organizational values were the subject of joint discussion. Another example mentioned were service design workshops where young employees had the chance to design “a good work day” for themselves. During such workshops, employees increased their understanding of their own and each other’s needs and preferences. The workshops fostered a general sense of belonging in the organization, and concrete development steps were also planned and implemented based on their results.

One powerful way to contribute to a positive employee experience is to acknowledge employees’ role and contribution when reporting results and communicating about successes. One interviewee emphasized the importance of remembering to thank employees properly:

“I was witness to a memorable moment when a CEO, as part of an international Capital Market Day aimed at analysts, investors, and media, publicly thanked local employees for their help in turning the company around. This was bound to have a positive long-term impact on employee experience.” [I1]

One key benefit of creating shared spaces and meaningful moments of interaction in an organization is that people are able to build a common language for higher-level and more complex issues, such as shared value and purpose. In practice, this can include defining strategic key concepts and discussing what they mean to different stakeholders. As an example, one interviewee mentioned the concept of ‘growth’. As growth can have varying connotations, it is important to explore its significance from many angles:

“For a client, growth may mean more business, which in turn boosts tax revenue for the benefit of society. For an employee, growth may be a means to develop both one’s own and the client’s professional competencies. For an employer, growth may mean an increased ability to offer more jobs and sustainable career paths.” [I2]

Without a shared discussion and understanding of strategic key concepts and their multifaceted meanings, it is difficult for employees and other stakeholders to feel united, passionate about shared goals, or inspired about a larger purpose.

3.3 How to create shared value

Building on the seminal work on creating shared value by Porter and Kramer (2011), Menghwar & Daood (2021) carried out a systematic literature review of the concept with an aim to provide an integrative perspective to diverse partly overlapping definitions. As a result, they argue that creating shared value should be seen as a “strategic process” whereby corporations can solve social problems relevant to their core value chain, while making direct economic profits (p. 467). By emphasizing strategic decision-making, they make the point that shared value creation is not a one-time activity (p. 473). It must be acknowledged, however, that there are inevitable tensions between business and society (Crane et al., 2014) that shared value creation is unable to solve. Furthermore, strategic processes often require complex decision-

making, as there are integrated networks of external and internal factors affecting the attempts of shared value creation and, in many cases, it is far from clear “how value is created and distributed among stakeholders” (Menghwar & Daood, 2021, pp. 482, 474; Crane et al., 2014).

Looking into the future, some proponents of shared value suggest that the overall urge to collaborate with an aim to benefit all stakeholders is in the end more powerful than the more traditional approach based on economic trade-offs between social goals and economic goals (Freeman, 2017). It is indeed important to ask what benefits, besides generating profits, a company has to offer to society. And as the operating environments of organizations are growing increasingly global in terms of impact, one may ask what benefits the company will offer to the world. If we look at companies outside of their societal context or separately from the people working there, it may be difficult to identify purposes for their operations. This is because recognizing an organization's purpose and its significance requires that we detect connections between stakeholder groups. (Salonen & Camilleri, 2020.)

Through shared value creation, we can identify multiple purposes for an organization's existence, not just one single purpose. For example, to succeed in the traditional pharmaceutical market, companies are accustomed to conducting a competitor analysis and, on that basis, they may seek to produce an antibiotic more cost-effectively than their competitors. The purpose here is to generate profits for owners. For a company that is more aware of its place in the world, the purpose might focus on fighting the bacterium against which the antibiotic is designed. When a company's mission is perceived in this way, the purpose is to help the persons infected with the bacterium to recover. From this point of view, another organization operating in the same industry, which was previously identified primarily as a competitor, can be considered a partner in the fight against the real competitor, the bacterium. Seen in this way, there is more than one purpose to the existence of a pharmaceutical company. (Salonen & Tapani, 2021.)

Along these same lines, the rapid development of vaccines against Covid-19 became possible because information was shared and not pledged. The real competitor was the virus that caused the disease and not another company in the same industry. The ultimate purpose was to stop the virus and not beat a competitor. The mindset differed from traditional competitive thinking. The problem with traditional competitive thinking is that when competing against other companies in the same industry, the resources available may not be ideally focused on the most crucial issue. If that happens, the aim is not primarily to benefit society or its citizens but to maximize profits for business owners.

The approach of shared value creation focuses on benefiting as many different parties as possible (Figure 1). In practice, shared value creation is a complex issue and clear-cut win-win situations can be difficult to achieve. However, it is also possible to create shared value in rather simple ways. For example, a company may offer its clients extended warranties that function as a guarantee for the quality of a product or service. This promise of quality can motivate the company's employees, who may feel that they are change makers in the world through their work. In addition, the company's reputation may be enhanced, as its products or services inspire public confidence. With sustainable products, the company demonstrates that its operations are based on resource wisdom, i.e. responsible use of natural resources. Therefore, extended guarantees can also function as a statement against wasteful use of natural resources.

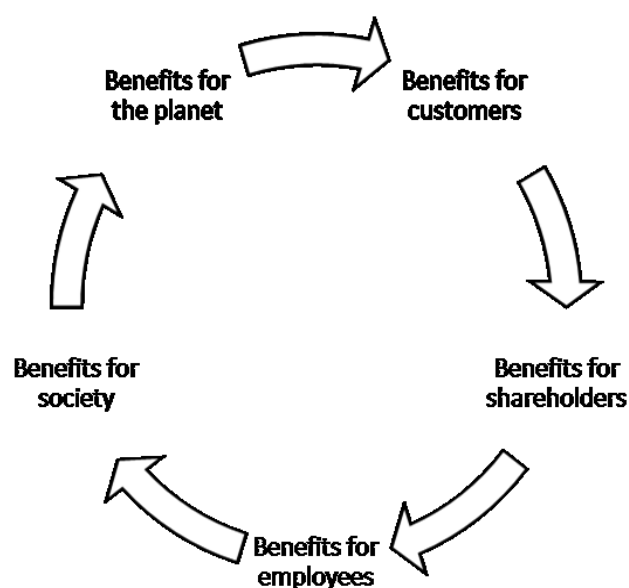


Figure 1: Shared value creation is based on co-benefits (Salonen & Tapani, 2021)

Essentially, economic activity that creates shared value aims to secure a good future for humanity. Shared value creation arises from the organization's strategic recognition of how its product and service development can meet societal challenges and tackle global problems. Shared value can also be generated in the form of positive employee experience arising from the sense of doing meaningful work. Responsible products and services, along with their design and production processes, are based on shared benefits for users, business owners, employees, society in which the company operates, and the future of humankind. (Salonen & Tapani, 2021.)

When talking about shared value, all our interviewees emphasized the need for organizations to take responsibility for their own operations, paying careful attention to ecological, social, and economic requirements. The interviewees pointed out that business needs to be economically sustainable and companies need to make responsible decisions concerning their own resources before they can help others. However, this should be done by valuing and respecting the needs of stakeholders such as nature, society, employees, and clients and taking into account the wider impacts of operations.

“The needs of nature and the planet are taken into account, as more and more decision-makers are aware that they cannot be ignored.” [I3]

“It is understood that our future is dependent on biodiversity and the planet must stay habitable. Humans need to maintain a healthy relationship with nature. Cultures, nations, and societies need to collaborate peacefully and with mutual respect. We need less war and more dignified opportunities for humans to develop themselves and live healthy lives.” [I2]

“We should have more business models that are based on shared value and value creation for stakeholders.” [I1]

Our interviewees feel that shared value should be based on justifiable solutions where the holistic consequences of business decisions have been systematically and transparently considered and evaluated. One interviewee [I1] had practical experience in monitoring biodiversity targets with the help of tools such as a model for network collaboration or various structured forms that force businesses to check their projects' biodiversity impacts step by step and find solutions to challenges already in the planning phase.

To help talk about and justify shared value, our interviewees emphasized the need to provide stakeholders with more insight into strategic decision-making. The decisions aimed at balanced sustainability and shared benefits may be difficult to make and it can sometimes be hard for the stakeholders to understand the processes and rationale behind them.

“Decisions are made in the cross-fire of stakeholder expectations. Decision-makers must explain, define, and assess their decisions openly and give room for discussion and negotiation. They should have the courage to admit that these are hard decisions even if their consequences have been studied and weighed.” [I3]

It may not be possible to provide equal benefits to all stakeholders, but it is possible to do one's best to listen to their points of view, justify decisions, and balance benefits and risks for a longer term. It is easier to evaluate long-term impact if there are transparent criteria for evaluation.

“No matter how dialogical and inclusive the decision-making process, I do not believe in shared value that would make all stakeholder groups equally happy. There are always those who feel they benefit less than others. You can, however, evaluate success by using set criteria. In the future, I wish there were a way to estimate an economic value for doing good. This would help demonstrate why the decisions made were successful in the long run. Companies should have the courage to think of the impact of shared value over a period of 20 years, for example.” [I1]

The interviewees all emphasize the need for open and honest communication to improve stakeholders' awareness of the risks and benefits affecting sunset industries. The informants are concerned about polarization between organizations and among stakeholder groups: there are businesses and people who understand the risks well and invest in new innovations, while at the other end of the spectrum there are those who refuse to acknowledge the need for change.

One interviewee [I3] brought up the need to be brutally honest about future scenarios: leaders should have the courage to communicate directly to stakeholders which jobs are likely to vanish, for example, and why it is important to implement changes together proactively.

“The risks of sunset industries are not properly acknowledged because businesses are stuck in their old structures and seek to safeguard those. However, all industries are changing, so adopting a realistic approach and accepting the hard facts that people are afraid to hear can be considered an act of love. Individuals have little power over structural change, but purpose-driven businesses can help their stakeholders to cope. It is better to be proactive together than having to react to changes alone.” [I3]

All in all, shared value was understood by the interviewees as a conscious and strategic attempt to extend the beneficial impact of business operations to cover as many target groups as possible, sometimes (but not necessarily) at the expense of profits in the short term. Shared value creation usually demands active collaboration and communication among stakeholders. As a concrete example, one informant mentioned active knowledge-sharing with existing and new stakeholder groups to gain a social license to operate. Stakeholders can also come together, for example, to multiply project results in new contexts, to test and develop ideas, and to widen the impact of operations by reaching out to new stakeholders who are likely to benefit but unaware of their opportunity to do so.

The interviewees point out that there is a need to approach all stakeholder groups with respect and sensitivity, justifying decisions and explaining benefits by speaking the language that addresses each stakeholder group specifically and takes into account their unique points of view. It is important to approach, for example, global investors and local stakeholders in ways that are tailored and targeted carefully, respecting their differing needs and bringing the issues at stake close to their everyday experiences and to venues where they spend time:

”Openness and honesty are important but not necessarily enough as such, as impactful communication requires the ability to read your audiences and apply the most suitable means of communication accordingly.” [I1]

As an example of tailored communication, one interviewee mentioned a human-centered approach to strategy talk:

“Let’s not lead strategy, or change, or figures. Rather, we should lead human beings towards a shared vision. Leadership should be deeper, more flexible, more inclusive. The figures will follow.” [I3]

Another example has to do with the necessity of creating shared value and communicating about it in ways that do not enforce polarization between stakeholders:

“I see major changes as gigantic amoebae moving and changing constantly. However, the amoeba needs to stay one organism. If the amoeba gets broken in the middle, there is polarization instead of a holistic change. A good change is just one organism, one amoeba.” [I2]

To support businesses and their stakeholders to adapt to change and create shared value in new and innovative ways, the interviewees mentioned the responsibility of certain bodies in society to take part in fostering purpose-driven collaboration and communication. First of all, the media has both power and responsibility to bring up and drive phenomena and bring up opportunities for shared value creation. Education has the same power and responsibility, even if change through education is slower and more like an ongoing process. Finally, there are policymakers and decision-makers who have the power and responsibility to guide operations and exert pressure. But having power is not in itself enough to convince or persuade stakeholders. Purpose-driven business and stakeholder action aimed at shared value creation require both external pressure and intrinsic ambition and motivation to be effective and inspirational.

3.4 Purpose - connecting people and the planet

We live in a global information age. The purpose of an organization is intertwined with and built on the network of influence in which it operates. Traditional regional borders are losing their relevance, as people are connected through the Internet worldwide. Companies find it natural to create networks both locally and around the world. Each identified networking opportunity can provide one additional reason, a purpose, for a company to exist.

A purpose-driven business sees its role in society in ways that extend "beyond its financial strategy and performance" (Henderson and Steen, 2015). Purpose, in this case, transcends profit-making and is more focused on benefiting all stakeholders with long-term impacts (Van Tuin et al., 2020). According to Bhattacharya et al. (2022), corporate purpose is a way of conceptualizing the company’s “overarching ethical vision”, which in turn helps employees see their work as meaningful and their role as actively contributing to solving pressing issues of our time. Such a broad conceptualization of purpose functions as an inspiration to stakeholders insofar as it is actively discussed with them, so that they remember it, believe in it, and make it come true through their own engagement and actions (Van Tuin et al., 2020; Bhattacharya et al., 2022; Bekke, 2006).

When asked to define purpose, our interviewees talked about both external and internal motivation to become purpose-driven in one’s thinking and behavior. Purpose was also seen as having many levels: personal, organizational, societal, and planetary. In general, purpose was defined as a long-term goal of making a meaningful contribution to the world in collaboration with others and in line with a shared set of values.

On the one hand, external policies and taxonomies along with other sustainability frameworks and standards were seen as exerting pressure in a good way, accelerating change and resulting in an increase in awareness:

“I feel that it is fine to talk about changing the world and saving the planet, but this is not yet a matter of the heart for CEOs. At the moment, it is the policies and laws that drive change and put pressure on business decisions and operations in a good way.” [I1]

“Our employees have been trained in SDGs: we have discussed them, studied them, and analyzed data to validate them. This is a prerequisite for us to be able to support our clients in green transition in line with the SDGs.” [I2]

However, one interviewee felt that the external pressure coming from policies, certifications, and frameworks is not enough any longer, and time has come to move on to truly value-based goals for sustainability transition. It is good that businesses have practical guidance to help them, but stakeholders are beginning to expect more. Young people in particular have grown impatient and want more ambitious initiatives with verifiable impact.

The value-based motivation to do good can also stem from employees’ urge to participate in something bigger than themselves and do meaningful work:

“A purpose-driven business makes its expertise and employee competencies available to others. It is the employees who fuel the change in practice by sharing their expertise.” [I3]

One interviewee felt that a combination of external and internal drivers is optimal at the moment, as change is slow and we cannot afford to rely solely on decision-makers’ intrinsic motivation:

“CEOs may also be driven by the so-called positive envy, which means that when they witness competitors talking about successful innovations fostering green transition, they want to excel those competitors and their innovations. Extra costs arising from old unsustainable solutions can also function as an external driver of change.” [I1]

All the interviewees point out that purpose-driven operations require resources and long-term commitment from an organization. There needs to be a justifiable goal and a measurable target to have a positive impact on the world within a certain time span.

“Mere talk does not help, we need concrete actions on a practical level. This is the most challenging part: making practical changes that require money and investments. A purpose statement does not do the trick.” [I1]

“Purpose goes hand in hand with courageous leadership: you need to participate actively, look for impact, and point the way. You should commit to a cause for five years, for example, stating that you are going to stand behind this commitment and contribute to it with all your expertise in accordance with your purpose.” [I3]

Last but not least, our interviewees saw purpose as a matter of communication. It is hard work to make practical contributions and their impact visible and widely known in a manner that is interesting and inspirational to different stakeholders. As one interviewee [I1] pointed out, in addition to achievements and successes, it is also important to talk about risks and dilemmas that purpose-driven operations and innovations bring about, such as how to approach nuclear power or how to generate emission-free energy. Another interviewee [I3] highlighted the need to be patient in communication: instead of constantly reporting individual episodes of doing good, organizations should create well-wrought narratives focused on results, practical benefits, and validated long-term impacts achieved in collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

As one practical communications solution with the potential of wide and long-term impact, one interviewee [I3] envisioned a common platform for businesses and their stakeholders to communicate about their purposes, their employees’ and collaboration partners’ expertise, and their concrete actions towards sustainable development goals. Such a platform could take the form of a joint bank of stories and documents highlighting which businesses and stakeholders have participated in sharing their expertise to fulfill a specific purpose. This would make concrete actions visible in real time and their overall impact would also gradually manifest itself, as more and more stories would appear on the platform. Inspired by this data, new stakeholders could join in and start conceptualizing their own role and expertise in relation to this wider community of purpose-driven actors with their goals, operations, and results.

This idea of a shared communication platform brings us back to concepts of meaningful work and positive employee experience: going through stories on the platform would help people recognize and internalize what they want to do, why, for whom, how and with what impact. Such a platform would also make it easy for organizations and individuals to form

networks with collaboration partners who share similar values and goals. All in all, the interviewees saw that in order to be purpose-driven in ways that have impact, we all need to play our part and work hard to make our intentions and efforts visible to each other. This makes it possible for others to ask difficult questions, present alternative views, adapt, get inspired, and make connections. And ultimately, it is such continuous interaction that carries the promise of shared understanding, mutual trust, and progress.

4 Discussion and Recommendations

“Silent revolution” refers to citizens’ changing values from materialism to post-materialism (Inglehart, 1977). Such a shift in values is also called for in connection with global sustainable development goals and sustainability transition. Agenda 2030 states that “[W]e are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (UN, 2015). The ongoing changes in values can be pivotal, as many things will change in society when people start to prioritize their life goals differently (Inglehart, 2018). Growing stakeholder demands for meaningful work, positive employee experience, shared value creation, and purpose-driven business can drive sustainability transition from a business point of view (Van Tuin et al. 2020; Barton et al., 2016).

Our objective in this study was to gain practical knowledge and understanding of how meaningful work, positive employee experience, shared value creation, and purpose are understood, implemented, and talked about in organizations today. We approached this objective through collecting experiences and opinions by corporate interviewees with long-standing praxis in strategic business development in multiple industries and fields. The interviewees were able to discuss a comprehensive cross-section of views represented by multiple stakeholder groups. The ultimate purpose of the interviews was to confirm and shed light on our hypothesis of needing to develop a common language and forms of everyday interaction around purpose and shared value between organizations and their diverse stakeholders. In future, more extensive research is needed into specific stakeholder experiences to develop everyday grassroots interaction among stakeholder groups on a human-to-human level. Such interaction, we believe, has the potential to generate positive effects not only on stakeholder collaboration but also on CSR authenticity and branding, thus helping to impact larger societal transformations in stakeholder values and ethics.

Our analysis suggests that purpose-driven business is a concept that is grounded in ethics (Bhattacharya et al., 2022; Van Tuin et al., 2020) and combines meaningful work, positive employee experience, and shared value creation. In practice, purpose-driven business has the potential to benefit employees, customers, other stakeholders, society, and sustainability transition overall on local and global levels. Overlapping manifestations of purpose-driven business and shared value creation were detected throughout our informants’ reflections.

Our results demonstrate that even though decisions and actions in organizations are largely guided and motivated by external pressure from policies, there are intensifying stakeholder demands and expectations, especially among younger generations, for undertaking more ambitious and value-based sustainability initiatives fuelled by intrinsic motivation. Organizations are expected to devote money and resources to making purposeful investments into the future. Furthermore, purpose-driven business operations are expected to be strategic long-term commitments and not just a series of episodic moments of “doing good”. To widen their purpose-driven networks and connections, organizations need to continually seek to convince and win over both old and new stakeholders with carefully wrought narratives based on practical examples that inspire hope and illustrate and verify long-term impact.

According to our results, purpose is also key for meaningful work and positive work experience. Short-term debate on the future of work revolves around improving existing solutions. The focus is often on making work more efficient, productive, and flexible. The broader change is related to the meanings we attach to work and it is reflected particularly in young people’s attitudes and changing values. According to our interviewees, employees feel that their work is meaningful if they can find a personal purpose and motivation for doing it; if it provides them with opportunities to learn and develop; if it helps them feel connected with those around them; if it allows them to create added value to others; and if they are able to build trust among different organizational stakeholders to achieve common goals.

The importance of active interaction between stakeholders was brought up over and over again by the informants. In this respect, our results are in line with previous research which shows that interaction is key if the purpose is to transcend the self and achieve something meaningful and valuable together with others (e.g. Metcalf & Benn, 2012). That is why we recommend that organizations devote time and resources to support employees and other stakeholders in trust-inducing interaction with each other as an integral part of everyone’s role and job description on an everyday basis.

Furthermore, to drive sustainability transition, we need to find ways to connect and collaborate more effectively, not only among stakeholders who have an ethical and moral orientation towards purpose-driven initiatives, but also with those who do not have an innate interest to benefit society or the world around them. Bhattacharya et al. (2022) found a positive link between employees' sense that they are working for a purpose-driven company and their actual sustainability behaviors. If articulated well and communicated skillfully, corporate purpose was found to inspire employees to take both collective and "psychological ownership" of sustainability actions. It is important to remember, however, that the researchers also pointed out that as many as 47% of their study respondents reported that they did not engage in any sustainability behaviors at all and that, as it is, there are many companies and individuals who struggle with being "truly sustainable" even despite their best intentions and efforts.

According to Michaelson et al. (2014), organizations can contribute to a person's sense of doing meaningful work through cultivating a culture of participation, i.e. by actively engaging employees and other stakeholders in "deciding and doing" (p. 83). In the context of seeking to advance sustainable development goals, such a participatory approach focuses on "consensus building and communication, and trust and cooperation" among all stakeholders (Burton & Dunn 2005, p. 457). The effectiveness of participation depends on the power of an individual to act autonomously in deciding how they want to participate and how they wish to make use of the opportunities of learning and growth offered to them in purpose-driven work contexts. According to Van Tuin et al. (2022), a culture that supports autonomous motivation breeds purpose-driven behavior, while a culture of control and micro-management often results in detachment and lack of engagement (Howard et al., 2016).

Our analysis confirmed the hypothesis that purpose can function as a driver for sustainability transition only if it is "cascaded, enacted and absorbed through appropriate and sustained communications and actions" (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). There needs to be systematic and continuous communication around purpose to make sure that it is sufficiently well defined and articulated for a broad range of stakeholders to understand it and connect with it. Furthermore, communication needs to be "conversational" to help flesh out a purpose and bring it to life: we need to create spaces of interaction where participants are invited in a "generative dialogue around purpose and meaning" between different stakeholder positions and points of view (Van Tuin et al, 2020; Bekke, 2006).

Nowadays, finding a common language for stakeholders is not easy. Product manufacturing chains and raw material flows are complex. Typically, an organization is part of a system that is global. Understanding the complex world is difficult. Instead of linear thinking, systems thinking is needed. Systems thinking reveals that social life cannot exist without an ecological basis and without communities and societies, there can be no economy. The economy is an ecosocial process based on natural resources and human inputs. Recognizing this hierarchy as the indisputable foundation of human existence opens the door to building a sustainable future. (Salonen & Konkka, 2015.) Identifying the purpose of an organization needs to be based on a systemic understanding of its operating environment with all its real-life connections and interactions with society and the wider world. Companies do not operate in isolation from the world but as part of it.

In terms of employee experience, such a transition to more systemic thinking is downright revolutionary. If connections between things, phenomena, and people are at the center of attention, the experience of being part of a larger whole, every day and every moment, grows and intensifies. Employees are able to regard their work as meaningful when they recognize ways in which they can, through work, contribute to solving pressing issues of our time (Bhattacharya et al., 2022). The growing influence of post-materialism is reflected in people's increasing desire to "live for something", to join a larger mission that is important to them. Nowadays, it may even be that, through one's work, one can feel involved in correcting a social problem or turning the world into a better place, thus having a sense of "becoming a better person at work" (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020, p. 40; also Sisodia & Gelb, 2019). Such an experience can be deeply satisfying for a person's mental needs, as it helps to identify meaningful purposes for one's existence. This is especially the case in societies where basic human needs related to food, shelter and healthcare are fulfilled (Inglehart, 2008). The web of meaning (Lent, 2017) is based on a recognition of interconnectedness: it is not possible for the lungs to feel well if the heart suffers. Similarly, an organization cannot succeed in the long run if its employees feel ill and the legitimacy of its existence is lost to the society where it operates.

As key dimensions of a positive employee experience, our interviewees mentioned being addressed and valued as a human being with personal dignity; ability to align personal values with organizational values; and possibility to openly analyze and discuss employer value proposition and how it comes true in everyday actions in the workplace. The informants recommend building spaces of interaction, such as design workshops and other discussion fora, for stakeholders in order to make value propositions and expectations visible. The better the stakeholders know each other's needs and expectations, the easier it is to develop a shared understanding of and commitment to driving changes and developments in line with personal and organizational purposes. However, Lips-Wiersma et al. point out that even though organizations should be "very clear on their purpose" (2020, p. 49), they should also be careful not to manipulate and alienate

stakeholders by being too assertive in communicating their strategic messages (p. 47; see also Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Michaelson et al., 2014).

A sense of alienation and detachment is detrimental to employee experience. Work that is perceived to be detached from the world around offers no purpose and appears meaningless to employees. Meaningful work with purpose is built on belonging to the network of effects, and this is why we emphasize the importance of the interaction between things, phenomena, and people. Such intertwined nodes form a network through which an organization can make an impact. Every connection with this network can help perceive the organization's purposes and create shared value that combines multiple benefits in a changing world (Salonen & Tapani, 2021).

In order to create shared value, our interviewees emphasized the need to aim at so-called balanced sustainability, which seeks to critically assess risks and benefits to all relevant stakeholders before implementing any major projects potentially harmful to the planet and people. As difficult decisions cannot be avoided, it is recommended that stakeholders be given more access and insight into decision-making processes to be able to better understand the challenges and dilemmas involved. Through openly sharing and negotiating transparent criteria for value creation and its benefits, organizations can build trust between stakeholders.

As it is, the networked world is interdependent but unequal. However, there is a perceived increase in awareness of the consequences of consumer choices; in desire to verify the origin and responsibility of products; in concern for a sustainable future that guides consumption choices; and in potential for making responsible choices more easily than before. (Vesala-Varttala et al., 2021; Salonen et al., 2014.) According to our analysis, it is important for organizations to develop patience and skill to address different stakeholders in ways that respect their unique concerns and points of view. It is the responsibility of every organization to ensure that the future is worth seeing. If an organization is operating in a way that diminishes hope for the future, it will have the characteristics of a “sunset organization”. In contrast, a “sunrise organization” recognizes that its purpose is to strengthen hope for the future.

Especially in developed industrialized societies, the silent revolution has already shifted people's thinking and behavior from materialism towards post-materialism (Inglehart, 2008). This shift can be a key driver for effective sustainability transition, understood as a fundamental societal change towards building a better life and society. Ten years from now, we will hopefully be talking about climate change, the depletion of natural resources, and the loss of biodiversity in a completely different tone than today. Sunrise organizations will mainstream their solutions. The scaling potential of solutions that restore hope for the future is global in size. Building solutions that secure human life on Earth is the greatest possible purpose for the existence of organizations and their stakeholders.

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