



Leadership for the Greater Good
Empowering leaders to drive positive change

March 2023



bluebird
leadership

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Introduction

“

The greatest threat to our planet is the belief that someone else will save it.

Robert Swan

”



Leaders have the power to ignite change and influence communities far beyond the boundaries of an organisation. With a clear vision, effective leadership can inspire and mobilise individuals towards a common cause or goal, advocate for important issues, and work towards addressing societal challenges.¹

Even on a smaller scale, leaders such as educators, coaches, and community organisers can make meaningful impact on the lives of those around them by promoting positive values and creating a sense of community and belonging.

Research has shown that transformational leadership, characterised by inspiration and empowerment, can positively impact organisational performance, employee well-being, and even social responsibility. Ethical leadership, on the other hand, can encourage ethical practices within an organisation and beyond by influencing employee attitudes and behaviours.²

Many organisations today recognise the critical role of people leaders in driving cultural change towards achieving Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) goals. By prioritising ESG strategies, organisations can harness the power of leadership to create a better world, one that is sustainable, equitable, and inclusive. Leadership is not limited by the confines of an organisation, but rather a force that has the potential to shape the world around us.

Bluebird Leadership partnered with The Serenity Collective to explore how to empower leaders in driving positive change through a series of Think Tanks that brought together leaders from different industries and sectors.

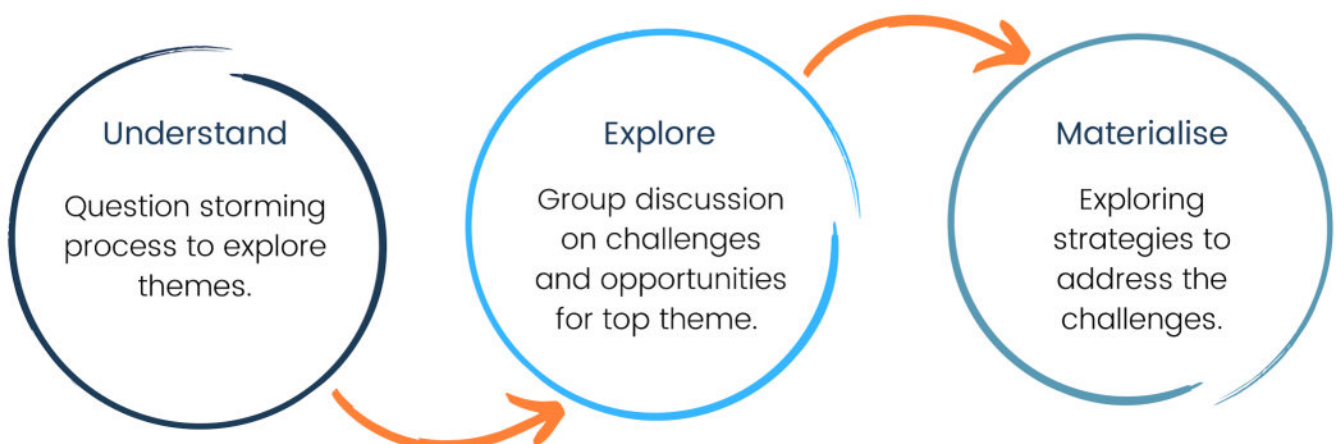
This paper presents an overview of the key themes discussed during the workshops, highlighting the challenges faced by organisations and leaders, as well as the opportunities available to them. Additionally, the paper offers a range of strategies for organisations to consider and adopt as they navigate the complex landscape of ESG.

Methodology

The workshops were designed to leverage the principles of design thinking to facilitate meaningful discussions around the themes of ESG. Design thinking is a human-centred approach to problem solving that involves empathy, ideation, prototyping, and testing. In this case, the workshops utilised a divergent approach to explore the themes, allowing for a wide range of ideas and perspectives to be shared. Once the themes had been explored, the workshops then shifted to a convergent process where challenges and opportunities were discussed in greater detail.

Design thinking has become increasingly popular in recent years as a tool for promoting innovation and solving complex problems. By taking a human-centred approach, it encourages individuals and teams to address challenges with empathy and creativity, leading to more effective and sustainable solutions. This methodology can be especially useful in addressing the challenges and opportunities related to ESG, as it enables organisations to think beyond traditional approaches and consider a range of perspectives and possibilities.

The use of design thinking in these workshops provided a framework for participants to explore the themes of ESG in a structured and collaborative way. It allowed for a range of ideas to be shared and for participants to consider a range of strategies and solutions for addressing the challenges and opportunities related to ESG.



Themes

During the ideation phase of the workshop, participants were encouraged to share their thoughts freely and without judgment in order to create a rich and varied pool of ideas. These ideas were then grouped into themes and categories, allowing for a deeper exploration of each concept. The brainstorming sessions produced a number of themes (as illustrated below) which informed the discussion on challenges and opportunities for organisations.

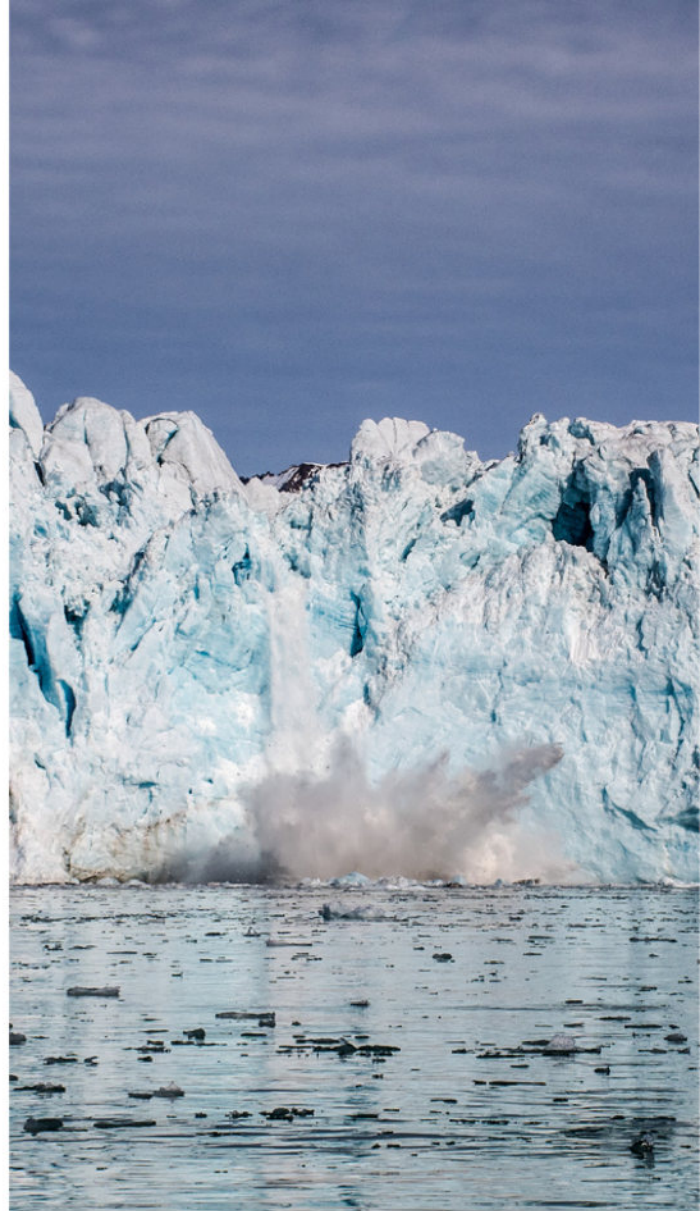


Challenges

Leaders and organisations face several challenges when it comes to embedding ESG. First and foremost, it can be challenging to define ESG and align it with the organisation's purpose, values, and strategy, as it is important to understand why ESG is essential.

A significant challenge is changing the profit versus purpose paradigm and finding the right balance between sustainability and remaining profitable.

It can also be difficult to allocate resources to the ESG function and initiatives, therefore it becomes the role of people leaders across the organisation to lead initiatives. However, people leaders are already overwhelmed and have a lot on their plates with most managing functions as well as their people and teams.



To make progress, systemic change is needed, requiring a fundamental shift in how organisations operate. It is crucial to move from a compliance mindset to one where the impact on the world is more positive than negative. Additionally, organisations must know where to start and how to measure their impact through metrics and measurements.

Embedding ESG into an organisation's operations is a complex process that requires addressing various challenges, and some companies have taken innovative approaches to tackle these challenges.

Organisations such as Unilever, Novo Nordisk and Patagonia have shown that embedding ESG into an organisation's culture is feasible and can lead to long term benefits, including increased profitability and stakeholder satisfaction.

How organisations are tackling challenges

Unilever

Unilever has aligned its sustainability strategy with its business goals and redefined its purpose as a "sustainable living plan," which has helped the organisation to reduce waste, emissions and enhance social impact while remaining profitable.³

Novo Nordisk

Danish pharmaceutical company, Novo Nordisk has integrated ESG principles into its corporate strategy, including embedding sustainable practices across the value chain, and engaging stakeholders to drive positive change.⁴

Patagonia

Patagonia has integrated ESG into its mission statement and business strategy and has also demonstrated a commitment to social and environmental issues by launching campaigns to raise awareness about climate change and responsible sourcing.⁵



Opportunities

There are numerous opportunities available to leaders and organisations who are committed to ESG. For instance, one of the most important aspects of driving positive change is to communicate a compelling vision that inspires and motivates employees, consumers, and other stakeholders. This can foster greater engagement, buy-in, and empowerment across the organisation.

It is also important to have alignment among senior leaders and to educate employees and consumers on ESG principles and practices. By sharing knowledge and information, organisations can promote a greater understanding of the importance of ESG and encourage individuals to take action in support of these initiatives.

Another key opportunity is to celebrate wins and successes, regardless of how small they may be. This can help to build momentum and create a sense of excitement and pride among employees and other stakeholders. It can also demonstrate that ESG efforts are making a real difference and inspire others to get involved.

Leaders should challenge (and also encourage their people to do so) the current ways of working when it comes to ESG as traditional business models may not be sustainable in the long term. Many current practices may prioritise short term profits over long term sustainability, and may not take into account the ESG impacts of their actions.

By challenging the status quo and implementing new practices that align with ESG principles, leaders can create more sustainable and responsible businesses that prioritise the wellbeing of their stakeholders and the planet. This can not only benefit the organisation in the long term but also contribute to a more sustainable future for all.



Patagonia's journey

Patagonia, an outdoor clothing and technical gear company, has been a leader in environmental and social responsibility for decades. The company's founder, Yvon Chouinard, has been an advocate for environmental causes since the 1970s, and this ethos has been woven into the fabric of the company from the beginning.

Patagonia has built its brand around environmental and social responsibility and integrated ESG into their culture. Patagonia has taken several steps to reduce its environmental impact. The company has implemented sustainable materials and manufacturing practices, such as using recycled and organic cotton, and reducing water usage in its factories.

Patagonia also encourages customers to repair and recycle their clothing rather than buying new items, further reducing waste. On the social responsibility front, Patagonia has implemented fair labour practices and has been transparent about its supply chain, ensuring that workers are treated fairly and that the company's products are not made through exploitative labour practices.

Patagonia's commitment to ESG has resonated with consumers and employees, and they have received recognition for their efforts. In 2020, they were named one of the World's Most Innovative Companies by Fast Company and one of the World's Most Ethical Companies by the Ethisphere Institute.

Strategies

To build a sustainable and responsible business model, it's essential for organisations to have a well planned and structured approach towards ESG transformation. This involves identifying, prioritising, and addressing risks and opportunities, and adopting suitable strategies to achieve the desired outcomes. Some of the strategies that organisations can consider include implementing ESG focused policies, engaging with stakeholders, establishing clear accountability and governance structures, investing in sustainable technologies and practices, measuring and reporting ESG performance, and integrating ESG into the overall business strategy.

The following strategies were discussed during the workshops and can help organisations navigate the complex ESG landscape and drive positive change towards a more sustainable future. The strategies have also been categorised by a rating scale based on their level of implementation, ranging from easy to difficult.



1. Define ESG and align to strategy



2. Inspire action through story telling



3. Celebrate wins and successes



4. Educate employees and customers



5. Ensure executive and senior leader alignment



6. Allocate sufficient resources



7. Elicit systemic change



1. Define ESG & align to strategy

ESG factors are important for organisations to consider in their operations. However, determining what is appropriate or acceptable for a specific industry can be challenging. It is crucial to understand what ESG means in the context of the industry and align ESG practices to the core business. For example, companies in the energy sector would have different ESG practices compared to those in the retail industry.

Once organisations have identified the appropriate ESG practices for their industry, it is essential to find a baseline and determine what they can control. This involves assessing current ESG practices and identifying areas where the organisation can make a meaningful impact. For instance, a company may determine that they can reduce their carbon footprint by switching to renewable energy sources or reducing waste production.

It is also important to align ESG practices with the core business to ensure that they are integrated into the organisation's culture and values. By aligning ESG practices with the core business, organisations can create long-term value while also meeting their ESG goals. For instance, an organisation that values sustainability may prioritise reducing its carbon footprint by switching to renewable energy sources.

Finally, it is crucial to get the basics right first before expanding ESG practices. This includes implementing basic ESG practices such as reducing energy consumption, minimising waste production, and ensuring safe working conditions. By getting the basics right, organisations can establish a foundation for more advanced ESG practices and gradually work towards more significant improvements.

Implementation rating scale: moderate 



How organisations are defining ESG and aligning to their business strategy

Microsoft

Microsoft defines its ESG goals around six key areas: carbon, water, waste, ecosystems, human rights, and data protection. To start small, the company has set a goal to become carbon negative by 2030 and is working towards achieving this by investing in clean energy and improving energy efficiency.⁶

Etsy

Etsy's ESG strategy is centred around its mission of "keeping commerce human." The company's goals include promoting sustainable and ethical production, supporting diverse and inclusive communities, and reducing its environmental footprint. Etsy has implemented a carbon offset program for its shipping emissions and encourages its sellers to use eco-friendly packaging.⁷

Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson's ESG strategy focuses on improving health outcomes, promoting diversity and inclusion, and reducing its environmental impact. To start small, the company has set a goal to achieve zero waste to landfill by 2025 and has implemented recycling and composting programs at its facilities.⁸

2. Inspire action through storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful tool for changing organisational culture as it can help individuals connect to the shared values, beliefs, and experiences that define an organisation. By sharing stories, leaders and employees can communicate their perspectives and experiences, build trust, and create a sense of community within the organisation.

Storytelling also allows organisations to communicate their purpose and mission in a way that resonates with employees, stakeholders, and customers. Studies have shown that storytelling can have a significant impact on organisational culture, fostering a sense of shared identity and strengthen the bonds between employees.⁹

For example, Patagonia uses storytelling as a way to communicate their values and inspire their employees and customers to take action. Patagonia's "Worn Wear" campaign, which encourages customers to repair and reuse their clothes rather than buying new ones, is one such example.

Through storytelling, Patagonia has communicated the importance of sustainability and inspired a culture of reusing and repairing clothes, reducing waste, and promoting sustainable practices.

Storytelling can be an effective tool for driving cultural change towards ESG goals and create a sense of shared purpose and inspire employees to take action.

Many companies are leveraging storytelling as a way to change their organisational culture towards greater sustainability and research supports the use of storytelling as a tool for creating shared purpose, building trust and credibility among stakeholders, which can lead to greater engagement and support for sustainability initiatives.¹⁰

Implementation rating scale: easy



3. Celebrate wins and successes

Celebrating wins and successes is an important aspect of any organisation's journey towards achieving their ESG goals. It is crucial to acknowledge and celebrate small and big achievements and use them as a catalyst to drive more significant change.¹¹

One way that organisations can celebrate their successes is by sharing their achievements with their stakeholders, including employees, customers, and investors. This could involve creating a report or an annual review that outlines the progress made towards their ESG targets and the impact it has had on the company and society as a whole.¹²

Another way companies can celebrate their ESG successes is by creating visible symbols of their commitment to sustainability. This could include displaying certifications or awards in the workplace, such as certifications for sustainable buildings or the B Corp certification for socially responsible businesses.



Organisations can also celebrate ESG successes by highlighting the individuals or teams who have made significant contributions towards achieving their sustainability goals. This recognition can take the form of rewards, bonuses, or promotions, which can serve as an incentive for employees to continue making sustainable choices.

For example, Coca-Cola recognised its "Water Stewardship Champions" in 2021, who were employees from around the world that had demonstrated a commitment to water stewardship.

Celebrating ESG wins and successes is an essential step in creating a sustainable culture within an organisation. By sharing successes, creating visible symbols, and recognising individual contributions, companies can motivate employees and stakeholders to continue taking actions towards achieving their ESG goals.

Implementation rating scale: easy 



4. Educate employees and customers

It is important for organisations to educate employees and consumers about ESG as it helps to build awareness, understanding, and support for the organisation's ESG initiatives. By providing education and training, employees and consumers can better understand the company's goals, values, and priorities related to ESG. This understanding can lead to increased engagement and buy-in, which can result in more effective and sustainable ESG practices.¹³

Awareness and education can also help to create a culture of accountability and responsibility towards ESG issues. When employees and consumers are aware of the impact of their actions on the environment and society, they are more likely to make choices that align with the organisation's ESG goals. This can include reducing waste, conserving energy, and supporting ethical and sustainable practices.¹⁴

Educating employees and consumers about ESG can also benefit the organisation's reputation and bottom line. Consumers are increasingly looking for companies that prioritise ESG issues and are more likely to support and recommend organisations that align with their values. Organisations with strong ESG practices have been shown to have better financial performance and lower risk, making them more attractive to investors.¹⁵

Overall, education is an important tool for organisations to create a culture of awareness, responsibility, and support for ESG practices. Companies can educate their employees and consumers on ESG issues by implementing various strategies.

Implementation rating scale: moderate



How organisations can educate employees and consumers

Providing learning opportunities

Organisations can offer experiential learning opportunities which tackle real-world challenges to their employees on ESG issues. This will not only increase employees' awareness and knowledge but will foster a deeper understanding of complex issues, enabling them to become ESG champions in the workplace.

Publishing sustainability reports

Organisations can publish sustainability reports that outline their ESG performance and progress. These reports can be made publicly available and shared with employees and consumers to raise awareness and provide transparency.

Engaging with stakeholders

Organisations must engage with stakeholders, such as employees, customers, suppliers, investors and communities through ongoing dialogue on their ESG efforts. Education and awareness is no longer sufficient as stakeholders are demanding more from companies.

Incorporating ESG in marketing and advertising

Organisations can incorporate ESG messages in their marketing and advertising campaigns to educate their consumers. This can be done through advertising campaigns that promote their sustainability efforts, product labelling that highlights eco-friendliness or social impact, and promotional materials that educate consumers on sustainable consumption.¹⁶

5. Ensure board, executive and senior leader alignment

Getting senior leader, executive and board buy-in for ESG is crucial for the successful integration of ESG into the organisation's strategy and operations.

Communicate the Business Case

It's important to demonstrate how ESG aligns with the organisation's mission and values, and how it can drive long-term financial performance. For instance, BlackRock's CEO Larry Fink has been vocal about the importance of ESG integration, stating that "companies that better understand changing expectations and societal needs are more likely to build long-term value."¹⁷

Incorporate ESG into Performance Metrics

Including ESG metrics into compensation can incentivise boards and executives to prioritise ESG initiatives. For example, Danone has linked a portion of its executive bonuses to ESG performance, with specific targets related to sustainable agriculture, carbon emissions reduction, and social impact.¹⁸

Provide Education and Training

Organisations can provide education and training on ESG topics to help executives understand the relevance and importance of ESG.

Curate personal experiences

Some organisations have used personal experiences to help executives understand the importance of ESG and gain alignment.¹⁹

Patagonia's CEO took the company's entire executive team on a trip to Chile to witness the effects of climate change first hand. This experience helped them understand the urgency and importance of taking action on ESG issues.

Unilever requires all executives to spend time in developing countries to see the impact of the company's business on local communities and the environment. This experience helps executives understand the importance of sustainable business practices and the need to align with ESG principles.

There are also examples of organisations providing immersive experiences to executives to help them understand ESG issues and their impact, such as:

- The sustainability academy developed by Siemens in collaboration with the University of Cambridge, which provides senior executives with a hands-on learning experience about sustainability challenges and solutions.
- The Eco-Defenders program developed by Procter & Gamble, which immerses executives in real-world sustainability challenges, allowing them to experience the consequences of their actions and learn about potential solutions.
- The Climate Reality Leadership Corps, a program developed by former US Vice President Al Gore, which provides training and immersive experiences to help business leaders and other professionals understand climate change and take action.

Implementation rating scale: moderate





6. Allocate sufficient resources

To define and improve resourcing for ESG, organisations need to have a clear understanding of their ESG priorities and goals and align them with their core business. This involves identifying the specific ESG issues that are most material to their industry, stakeholders, and operations, and prioritising them based on their impact and relevance. By doing so, organisations can focus their efforts and resources on the areas that matter most and achieve meaningful results.

One way to improve resourcing for ESG is to establish clear accountabilities and responsibilities across the organisation. This involves defining roles and expectations for ESG within each business area or function and ensuring that everyone understands their part in achieving the company's ESG goals. It also requires regular communication and collaboration between different teams and stakeholders, to ensure that ESG considerations are integrated into all aspects of the business.²⁰

Another way to improve resourcing for ESG is to acknowledge that leaders are already overloaded with responsibilities and provide them with the support and resources they need to drive ESG initiatives. This can involve providing learning opportunities, assigning dedicated employees or teams to oversee ESG programs and projects. It may also involve leveraging external partners, such as consultants or non-profits, to provide expertise and guidance on ESG issues.

ESG is no longer a nice-to-have for businesses

It is now considered a critical factor that directly contributes to a business's capacity to access investment, finance, insurance, attract top talent, and maintain its licence to operate. Investors, consumers, and other stakeholders are increasingly demanding transparency and accountability from businesses on their ESG performance. Companies that fail to address ESG issues may face reputational damage, legal liabilities, and reduced access to capital. Therefore, organisations that prioritise ESG initiatives and integrate them into their core business strategy are more likely to thrive in the long run and meet the evolving expectations of their stakeholders.

Implementation rating scale: moderate



7. Elicit systemic change

Systemic change is a significant driver of ESG cultural transformation, and it involves shifting an organisation's entire approach to business operations, processes, and policies.

This approach requires a fundamental shift in the mindset of the organisation, which can lead to significant changes in how employees view and approach ESG issues.

Organisations are implementing systemic changes in several ways. Some organisations are adopting circular business models that focus on reducing waste, emissions, and pollution while also preserving natural resources. While others are embedding ESG metrics into their overall performance evaluation and compensation systems. This can incentivise employees to prioritise ESG performance and encourage them to seek out new and innovative ways to meet ESG goals.

Organisations are also partnering with other stakeholders, such as suppliers, customers, and investors, to drive systemic change across the value chain. For instance, some companies are working with their suppliers to ensure they meet ESG standards and are sustainable in their operations.

Systemic change involves integrating ESG considerations into an organisation's governance and decision-making processes. This can be done by forming ESG committees or task forces that are responsible for driving the organisation's ESG agenda. An example is PepsiCo, which has established an ESG Council made up of senior leaders from across the organisation responsible for driving ESG strategies and initiatives.²¹

Systemic change is important as it enables organisations to embed ESG considerations into their core operations, leading to more sustainable practices and ultimately improving the organisation's long-term viability.

By taking a systemic approach, organisations can align ESG goals with their overall business objectives, drive employee engagement and stakeholder trust, and create long-term value for shareholders.

However, it is important to recognise that an organisation might not be able to change its core business without adverse effects on shareholder value and ESG transformation cannot be achieved overnight.

Organisations can re-evaluate their business practices, such as their supply chain management, energy sources, and workplace culture, to ensure they align with ESG principles.

For example, investing in renewable energy sources can not only reduce the carbon footprint but also improve operational efficiency and reduce costs.

Organisations can also prioritise employee well-being and diversity and inclusion initiatives can result in a more productive and engaged workforce, which can positively impact the company's financial performance in the long run.

Implementation rating scale: hard



Complex adaptive systems theory

Complex adaptive systems theory recognises that systems are dynamic and interconnected and that they are made up of individual agents or components that interact and adapt over time.²²

While applying complex adaptive systems theory to ESG transformation is not necessary, it can be helpful in understanding the interconnections between various aspects of the organisation and how they contribute to the overall ESG performance.

In the context of ESG transformation, organisations must navigate a complex web of relationships and interdependencies between their stakeholders, and the implementation of ESG strategies may require changes to the behaviour of individuals, groups, and even entire ecosystems.²³

However, it is important to note that complex adaptive systems theory can be esoteric and technical and may not be accessible or relevant to all organisations.

Organisations can still achieve meaningful ESG transformation by taking a holistic and integrated approach to ESG, involving all stakeholders, and working to address underlying systemic issues.²⁴

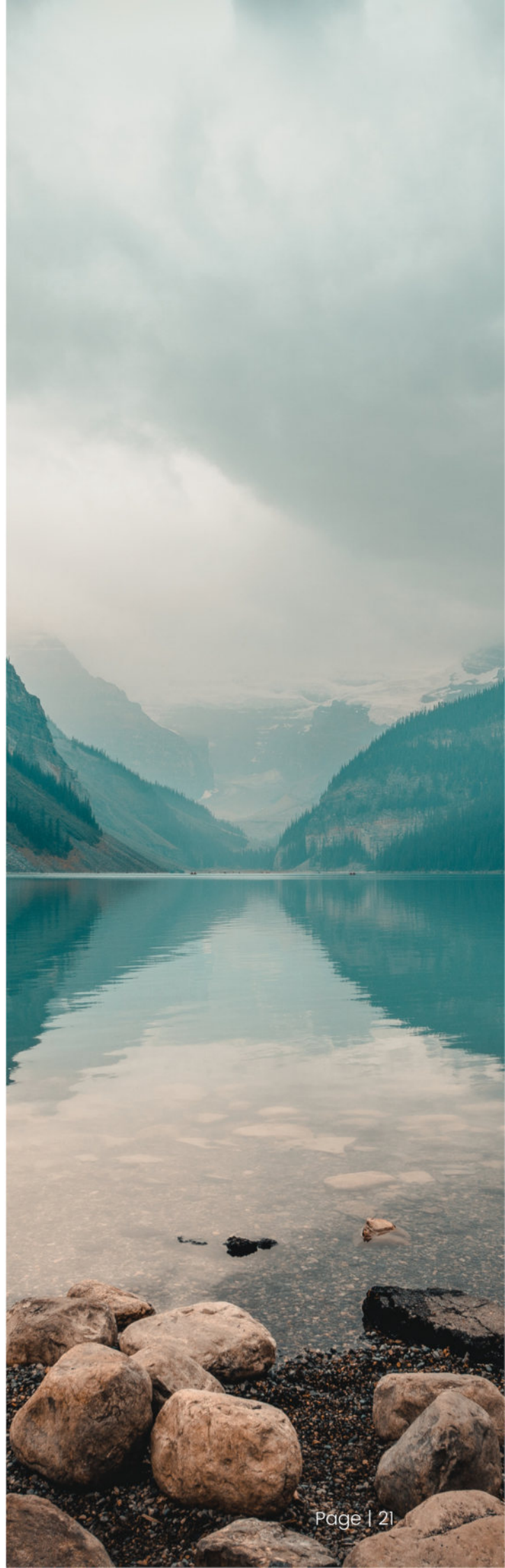
Conclusion

The discussions held during the workshops have shed light on the challenges and opportunities presented to organisations and leaders as they strive to achieve their ESG goals.

The range of strategies outlined in this paper can be adopted to help organisations navigate the complex ESG landscape and build a sustainable and responsible business model.

As organisations continue to integrate ESG principles into their operations, it is crucial that they remain committed to their ESG goals, implement sound strategies, and continually evaluate their progress to drive positive change.

With a structured approach to ESG transformation, organisations can address the risks and opportunities presented to them, and work towards building a better future for all stakeholders.



Acknowledgements

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As we look forward to the future, we envision a world where individuals, communities, and organisations collaborate to create a brighter, more sustainable future. In this vision, work is no longer viewed as a means to an end but as an opportunity for co-creation and collective growth.

We would also like to thank reviewers Andrea Otto-Davidson and Philip Woods, for taking the time and effort necessary to review the paper. We sincerely appreciate all valuable comments and suggestions, which helped us to improve the quality of the paper.

If you wish to discuss this report in further detail, or learn more about our programs and our work, please contact Bluebird Leadership's Managing Director:

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About us

We're not an ordinary leadership development or management consultancy. Our services meet at the intersection of people and the planet.

Leadership is a force for good, but it's not always easy to know how to harness that force effectively. That's where we come in. We offer resources and guidance to help leaders and organisations develop the skills and mindset needed to create positive ripple effects in their work and in the world.

Our Vision

Our vision is to empower leaders and organisations to drive positive change.

Our Mission

Our mission is to help leaders and organisations rethink how they lead, so they can unlock their potential and be empowered to drive greater impact.



What we do

We're all about empowering leaders to be the change they want to see. We know that leadership can be a tough and lonely road, but we also believe that with the right tools and mindset, anyone can make a meaningful difference. Our leadership development and consulting services are designed to help leaders and organisations become the best they can be and foster transformative leadership to drive positive change.

Leadership Development

We provide innovative leadership solutions that enhance personal and team effectiveness, while addressing current and future challenges. Our programs are based on a holistic approach and are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) to promote both personal and organisational transformation towards a brighter future. We work in partnership with leaders and organisations to cultivate sustainable leadership solutions.

Our capabilities include:

- Design and development of leadership development programs from frontline leadership to executive levels.
- Design and development of leadership competency frameworks aligned to business strategies.
- Facilitation of leadership programs from frontline leadership to executive levels.
- Performance and mindset coaching from frontline leadership to executive levels.

Consulting

We specialise in advising organisations on how to effectively implement and operationalise their people, sustainability, and ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance) strategies. Our consulting approach emphasises finding opportunities to foster cultural change and creating personalised programs and initiatives.

By utilising our deep expertise across the employee lifecycle, and we partner with you to design and develop strategies, program and initiatives for employee experience, diversity and inclusion, and culture change.

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