



## **CEOs and Climate Action**

It's not about the intention;  
it's about navigating the tensions

October 2022

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# The mood on climate action continues to evolve in executive suites and boardrooms around the world.

**Leadership discussions are taking on a new and more urgent tone, driven by the science, shifts in the marketplace, and heightened stakeholder expectations. Moreover, anticipation of tighter and more exacting regulatory and reporting frameworks is sharpening leaders' focus on the necessity and value of both immediate and longer-term action. That said, we are well past the point of exhortation, as the costs of further delay become clearer, and the trade-offs and potential benefits of mitigation choices are better understood and accepted.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, 90 percent of CEOs surveyed by Fortune and Deloitte agree on the urgent need to address climate change concerns.<sup>2</sup>**

Whatever the motivation – to manage risk, capitalize on opportunity, or act upon conviction and align with the broadening sentiment for action – CEOs and the organizations they lead face a once in a generation moment to meet the climate challenge, and to do so with confidence. While climate is not the sole ESG-related issue demanding attention on C-suite and Board agendas, it is one of the most urgent and intractable priorities in the minds of the CEOs and board members with whom we speak. It is also the one that most keenly exercises their capacity to balance short- and long-term decisions.

In most instances, the impediment to action is not the intention. Instead, it's the navigation of a set of choices and tensions which define an organization's stance on climate action, and ultimately influence its future position, prospects, and prosperity.

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The core tensions we see CEOs, their executive teams, and boards grappling with are:

- 1 **Profit today, versus build for tomorrow**
- 2 **Follow, versus pave the way**
- 3 **Compete, versus collaborate**
- 4 **Pursue incremental, versus transformational change**
- 5 **Focus on a narrow set of stakeholder interests, versus a broader stakeholder set**

Of course, the ways in which these tensions are being felt and experienced differs according to each organization's state of maturity, along with its ambition, sector exposure, and readiness to shift. They also vary substantially according to the geographic, political, and economic contexts in which they are encountered, given the uneven adoption of climate action globally. As some countries lag in their responses, entities in others may be significantly disadvantaged by higher cost profiles, tighter regulatory compliance, and other constraints. Even while they lie outside the CEO's control, such factors must naturally be considered and will help shape strategic decisions as each tension is accentuated or mitigated according to different circumstances.

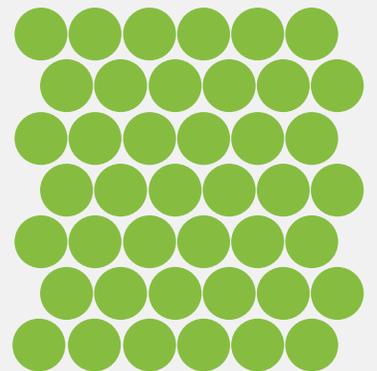
Even absent geopolitical and macroeconomic factors, some of the tensions will be more routinely navigated by CEOs in the normal course of business, while others maintain a distinctly climate-oriented flavor.

## The tensions and their implications

Understanding the tensions is to appreciate that they are rarely a case of clear choices, but of new, nuanced questions facing CEOs. Let's explore each in more detail.

# 01 —

Profit today, versus  
build for tomorrow



CEOs appreciate the reality of climate action's deferred credit equation: that the measurable benefits of today's investments may not be realized for many years, likely beyond their tenure.

Time and sustained commitment are required to build out infrastructure, and for investments to turn into profits. To many CEOs this is a familiar conundrum, especially in industries that require significant capital outlays to create assets that will deliver value over decades. CEOs will also need to determine how to balance today's existing, profitable offerings with investments in the sustainable, green businesses of tomorrow. Scaling carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) technologies in hard-to-abate manufacturing operations, or transitioning to regenerative agricultural processes for food production, are good examples of situations where businesses need to invest far ahead of the curve while continuing to deliver a profit in the present.

In contrast to these gradual, long-term adjustments, the purchase of carbon offsets represents a cheaper, more immediate way of reducing a company's measurable footprint. Given the increasing scrutiny of such 'on paper' compensatory techniques and growing preference for intrinsic organizational improvements, however, the inseting vs offsetting choice will likely remain a key topic of C-suite debate for the foreseeable future.

**A prime example of how this challenge is playing out is in the global automotive industry where manufacturers are edging forward, albeit at varying pace.**

While consumers predominantly continue to buy internal combustion engines, car manufacturers have been preparing to meet projected future demand for electric vehicles (EVs) using technologies, supply chains, and infrastructure still under development. In doing so, they are grappling with various dilemmas, such as how quickly they should make the shift to EVs, with which partners, and at what scale.

Another example – within the energy industry – sees oil and gas companies investing in renewables to ensure their business portfolios meet projected green energy needs and expectations. They do so while recognizing that many of today's investments will potentially undermine or directly challenge successful, highly profitable businesses that took decades and billions of dollars to build and optimize. The pressure on both sides of this tension has increased markedly in the energy sector over recent months, with geopolitical forces exerting additional stresses upon energy security and on traditional frameworks of supply and demand. Whether profits generated by fluctuating markets are re-invested to hasten a company's transition to climate readiness, or instead used to reassure skittish investors, is a related tension facing sector leaders.

One company accelerating its journey towards carbon neutrality is Danish energy generator Ørsted. With its origins in managing Denmark's North Sea oil and gas reserves, the 50.1% state-owned organization has – during a decade-long transformation – transitioned from being a highly carbon-intensive business towards one more focused on renewables like wind power, solar, and bioenergy. Coal will be phased out entirely by 2023, along with various other environmental programs which have resulted in Ørsted being named in the Corporate Knights Global 100 index for four years running (2019-2022) as the world's most sustainable energy company.<sup>3</sup> As of January 2022 Ørsted was also the world's largest developer of offshore wind power<sup>4</sup> – an impressive achievement given the well-documented challenges that incumbents face in investing to disrupt themselves.

# 02\_

Follow, versus  
pave the way



Most CEOs are convinced that a reduction of their organizations' carbon footprint is inevitable.

**What is less clear, even in the face of bold declarations by both politicians and peers, is timing.**

Every CEO, in every industry, must decide how fast and how far they want to go in their commitments on climate action. The quandary frequently faced is that of reconciling where an organization should lead, and where it can – and should – follow.

*The tension here is one of timing and leadership. Acting early and embracing the mantle of first mover creates powerful opportunities for differentiation.*

These can position the CEO to lead the climate conversation and help shape relevant industry regulation, while bolstering the organization's reputation as a sector leader. However, acting early – and being first to navigate through uncertainty and often unproven solutions – may bring risk.

Leading in uncharted territory can mean placing the wrong bets, making unwise commitments, or investing in the wrong technologies, approaches, supply chains, or partners. And the appetites of stakeholders for change are infinitely varied; some want faster or more fundamental climate action with less concern for corporate stability, while others see companies committing more heavily than they are willing to accept.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond Ørsted's leadership in energy noted previously, two further examples of companies paving the way are mainstream US clothing manufacturer and retailer Patagonia, Inc, and niche apparel disrupter Outerknown. Patagonia, founded in 1973 and active across five continents, has transitioned over five decades towards its circular economy strategy of today and commitment to carbon neutrality by 2025. Underlining its purpose-led ethos and setting a new standard for environmental corporate leadership, founder Yvon Chouinard in September 2022 relinquished his ownership of the

organization, committing all future Patagonia profits to fighting the climate crisis.<sup>6</sup> More recent market entrant Outerknown, launched in 2015, embraces sustainable business models and aims to make 100% of its products circular by 2030 through partnerships with organizations like the global nonprofit Sustainable Apparel Coalition. Outerknown positions itself as the first brand founded on a total commitment to sustainability.<sup>7</sup>

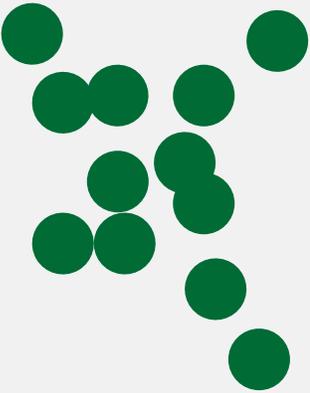
In another highly visible industry example, the automotive sector has in the past decade evolved from a clearly delineated 'incumbents versus upstarts' landscape to one that is more complex and nuanced. Just a few years ago, most large auto manufacturers were positioned as followers, transitioning gradually away from internal combustion engine (ICE) technologies while maximising their ROI in decades-old legacy infrastructure. Electric vehicle (EV) pure plays, meanwhile, established an early lead in the e-car space by blending knowledge of disruptive technologies and business models with acquired learnings on manufacturing and distribution.

Over the past few years however, the landscape has blurred, with a growing public emphasis on automotive decarbonization, a global energy crisis exacerbated by geopolitics and war, and factors like the EC's 2020 commitment to a 'European Clean Deal.' Additionally, recent EV market entrants like Lucid, Nio, and Rivian are encountering the same supply chain, costs, and distribution challenges as their long-established competitors.<sup>8</sup> No longer followers, the sector's incumbents – especially industry-leading OEMs with long histories of large scale manufacturing and distribution muscle – are introducing new EV models and rapidly closing the gap between themselves and the early market leaders.

"The traditional car makers will solve electrification. It's not fundamentally difficult at this point to make electric cars," Elon Musk, CEO of global EV leader Tesla said in early 2022, adding that "car companies are used to being hyper-competitive. They have entrenched customers, dealers, service, factories, existing expertise."<sup>9</sup>

# 03 —

Compete, versus  
collaborate



Early climate action can bring competitive advantage for an organization.

**Yet it can be challenging to shape a course in a system that, by its very nature, requires collective action between entities that are more accustomed to competing than collaborating.**

Whether going it alone or banding together, each approach brings its own set of advantages and benefits. Working independently can mean retaining all the rewards of any IP created or capabilities deployed, rather than sharing them with co-investors or joint developers. In the case of scalable technology platforms or products, this can mean the difference between reaping the full rewards of a unicorn-sized success or owning a fraction of that. On the other hand, it can also mean bearing the full weight and costs of risks, particularly if unproven technologies and solutions are involved. Collaboration can help to share and mitigate risks, as well as provide access to a wider diversity of resources, talent, and capabilities.

*Consider the food system, whereby players along the value chain rely on each other for the exchange of goods and services, facilitating the production and distribution of produce.*

Increasingly, these exchanges also necessitate the sharing of essential data for transparency and accountability. In a world where organizations depend upon the specialized capabilities of others along the value chain, the need to extend collaboration into areas like climate is clear and, indeed, essential. It is only through such teamwork that transparency can be created, supporting the management of upstream and downstream activities covered under Scope 3 emissions.<sup>10</sup>

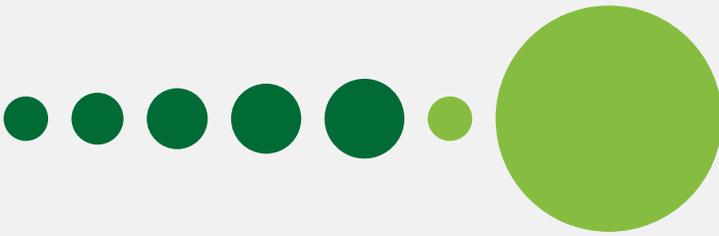
As an example, UNESDA (Union of European Soft Drinks Associations) includes members like PepsiCo, Coca-Cola, and Red Bull. Collectively, UNESDA's participating organizations have "developed a Circular Packaging Vision for 2030, which pledges that all packaging will be recycled or renewable, and that 90 percent of packaging waste will be collected."<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, sector leaders have the scale, influence, and ambition to go it alone while insisting that suppliers and distributors follow suit. Examples include Walmart in retailing,<sup>12</sup> Illycaffè's mobilization of the coffee ecosystem,<sup>13</sup> and Tesla in the automotive industry.<sup>14</sup>

To some extent, every sector leader uses its weight to shape its ecosystem. If the leader is on a journey of climate action, then it follows that suppliers and distributors will be expected to operate in ways that are complementary to its objectives.

# 04\_

Pursue incremental, versus  
transformational change



Following a decade of continuous technology disruption and economic upheaval, it is unsurprising that there is a widely felt sense of transformation fatigue in business right now.

**Yet CEOs recognize that climate action is to be taken neither half-heartedly, nor hesitantly. Meeting the challenge requires a fundamental commitment to change and a preparedness to ask questions about the actual businesses that a company is in, and how it might delineate decisions on its strategy and stakeholder responsibilities from the choices it faces in setting and meeting its climate action targets.**

Added to this is the reality that some sectors are more climate transformation-ready than others. The technology challenges faced by the energy industry, for example, along with energy producers' traditional inclination to maximize returns from legacy investments, are natural inhibitors to rapid transformation. In contrast, the food sector's quickly evolving farming practices, and its heavy ties to the land which can also serve as a carbon sink, can move more rapidly toward developing carbon reduction solutions today.

At the core of the challenge of how a company best sets and meets its climate commitments, lies the tension over whether it should take modest, sequential steps toward that goal, or more aggressively disrupt itself to reduce its climate footprint with urgency. The CEO's determination here is critical in determining the appropriate scope and the right speed of transformation for the company to make meaningful

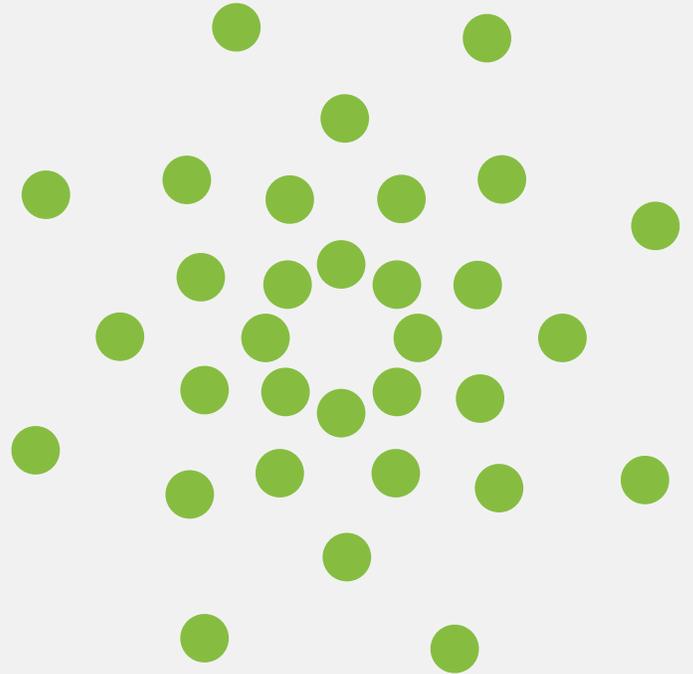
progress towards its climate goals, without jeopardizing the ability of the business to generate acceptable returns during its transition.

One global packaged goods company has in recent years sought to integrate climate action with its core business strategy. In the wake of stating more ambitious climate commitments it has assessed its entire product portfolio, committed to making all its packaging recyclable, redesigned many of its products, and reviewed its production processes to ensure the use of sustainable ingredients. Its pursuit of transformational change has also included a switch to more efficient manufacture processes, powered with renewable energy generated either onsite or through use of Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) with renewable energy providers.

A broader case is that of the finance industry which needs to address its own large real estate and technology footprint. Of critical importance, however, is the influential role that finance plays as an enabler of the transition *across* other industries. Whether it's iterative or transformational, the finance industry both provides capital to underwrite the significant investments needed by organizations and governments for climate action, as well as the backing and expertise to de-risk these transitions.

# 05 —

Focus on a narrow set  
of stakeholder interests,  
versus a broader  
stakeholder set



More than any preceding generation, today's CEOs face the largest ever range of well-informed, active and vocal stakeholders.

**This includes their own boards, policy makers, shareholders and institutional investors, customers, suppliers, employees, an ever more inquisitorial media, and society at large.**

On the one hand, these forces may appear to be converging, as calls for climate action grow louder across more unified stakeholder groups. On the other, the tendency of individual stakeholders to promote their views across a spectrum of priorities leaves them looking fragmented and nuanced. Not all board members, investors, customers, or employees feel the same way about climate action.

Complicating things further, within any one stakeholder group there are potentially four generations with varying opinions and ethnic, economic, political, and philosophical leanings, each maintaining their respective positions on climate action. For global organizations, the situation gets more complex still when dealing with varied societal and cultural norms and expectations, and distinct regulatory regimes.

In a number of recent, illustrative cases in the US and Europe, activist investors have exerted pressure on the CEOs and boards of mining, energy, and consumer companies to improve their climate change action plans. According to the nonprofit Ceres Investor Network, a record number of climate-related shareholder proposals have been filed to date in the US in 2022, with a significant proportion of targeted companies acquiescing to activist demands and agreeing to take the actions sought in these shareholder resolutions.<sup>15</sup>

Yet it's not all one-way traffic; some investors are lobbying environmentally conscious companies for the opposite reasons, so as to have them focus more purely on the generation of shareholder value. In early 2022 Unilever, widely recognized as a global pioneer in sustainable practices, came under pressure as activist hedge fund Triun Partners built a material stake in the consumer giant and sought to persuade its leadership

to implement a significant restructuring so as to improve profitability and shareholder returns.<sup>16</sup>

When dealing with such tensions, CEOs walk a tightrope of interests. The best leaders strive to align with their boards, actively seeking the input and counsel of board members. They acknowledge and take account of the interests of all relevant stakeholders, prioritizing thoughtfully while weighing the merits of various tradeoffs in approach, focus, and outcome. Coherence is critical, whether applied to the interests of a narrowly defined set of stakeholders, or in balancing the needs and expectations of a broader group. As every leader knows, clear choices are required; there is nothing to be gained, and much to be lost, if a CEO tries to appease divergent and incompatible interests.

For Patagonia, a strong alignment of corporate purpose and culture, and clearly stated standards which bind suppliers, distributors, and other partners to the company's ethos, mean that stakeholders willingly get behind the company and meet its prescribed standards. Conversely, those who do not share those values and standards tend to self-select themselves out of Patagonia's ecosystem.<sup>17</sup>

In the case of public companies, some of the biggest businesses on the planet are being proactive rather than reactive to pressure from shareholders. Alphabet subsidiary Google has declared its goal of being carbon neutral by 2030;<sup>18</sup> Amazon is reportedly the world's largest buyer of renewable energy;<sup>19</sup> J&J's goals include 100% recyclable, reusable, or compostable plastic packaging by 2025 and achieving 100% renewable energy and carbon neutrality for all its operations by 2030.<sup>20</sup> Microsoft, HP, Nike, and Apple each have sophisticated and detailed climate action plans in motion that address diverse groups of stakeholders, commentators, influencers, and investors.<sup>21</sup> It is never easy satisfying such a divergent and at times contradictory base, however these companies are demonstrating a willingness to report on progress while acknowledging the distance they have yet to travel.

# Navigating the tensions

**To navigate these often-daunting choices effectively, CEOs should create a holistic view of their climate and sustainability goals and integrate it within their overall enterprise purpose and strategy.**

Tensions will most likely amplify when there is a disconnect between business and climate strategies. Moreover, because some tensions may never be fully resolved, leaders will regularly need to make choices that are neither binary nor stark. Ultimately, the more a climate strategy complements and reinforces its corresponding corporate and business strategies, the more easily stakeholder dissonance can be reduced or eliminated – and the less distracted a CEO and leadership team will be.

As guidance to navigating the tensions, CEOs and their executive leaders should consider the following:

## **Salience and Fit**

- Which of the tensions are most salient, based on your organization's current circumstances and climate action maturity? What are the relationships between the tensions?
- Do the purpose, values, and/or ambition of your organization give you guidance on how to navigate any one, or combination, of the tensions?

## **Strategic Coherence**

- How do the more relevant tensions relate to, and reinforce, the current and/or emerging corporate strategy of your organization?
- What are the potential consequences of taking one stance versus another on any one choice or tension? What would have to be true for one stance to be better than another?<sup>22</sup>

## **Resilience and Adaptability**

- How might scenario modeling inform the stance that your organization should take? For the most complicated and consequential of the climate action choices, does the preferred stance make sense in plausible different futures?<sup>23</sup>
- How adaptable is the organization's position, given uncertainties regarding regulatory and market developments and investor sentiment – and the pace at which these factors might shift?

**Perhaps no stakeholder is as important a partner to a CEO in navigating these choices and tensions, as the Board of Directors.**

Boards are certainly under pressure to enhance their governance of, and disclosure regarding, climate risk, commitment, and action.<sup>24</sup> In the best of worlds, CEOs and their boards will develop a shared agenda on climate pledges and related actions. Doing so will require CEOs to consider their boards as partners on their climate action journey, as opposed to an additional stakeholder group to either be selectively listened to, or managed. CEOs should actively seek input from their boards on the most consequential of the choices and get their counsel in weighing and reconciling differing stakeholder interests, to help confirm direction with confidence.

Climate change – and the response it demands from business – is one of the most galvanizing and pressing issues of our time. Unlike other episodic challenges, we cannot expect or hope it will diminish over time; we are already living a new normal whose features and needs will only sharpen and increase in intensity. Some CEOs facing these demands are already evaluating

their strategic choices using the lens of sustainability. This both brings clarity to those choices and their concomitant decisions, while highlighting the tensions at the heart of this discussion. We believe that the winners in 2030 and beyond will be those businesses formed and reshaped by sustainability – and that CEOs are ultimately the ones who must reconcile the tensions inherent to these choices.

*Encouragingly, we are finding that leaders and organizations who view and treat climate action as a growth driver, rather than an inhibitor, are those who are already pressing ahead.*

# Endnotes

1. See Deloitte's Turning Point reports – The turning point: A global summary  
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13. Harvard Business Review, September 2022: "The Chair of Illycaffè on creating virtuous agricultural ecosystems"; <https://hbr.org/2022/09/the-chair-of-illycaff-on-creating-virtuous-agricultural-ecosystems>
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# About

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