Entrepreneurship, Leadership, and the Holy Grail of Sustainability: Why Creative Minds Outpace Executive Habits

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A report on the IFIS mini-conference of 5th March last, featuring Arnaud Blandin, Lead Faculty on Sustainability at CEDEP Global Executive Education Club and Entrepreneur in Residence at INSEAD, Fontainebleau, sponsored by the House of Sustainability, Luxembourg.

Since the 1990's, there has been a growing awareness that human economic progress is threatening the environment through carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and pervasive waste in resource use and industrial processing.

The climate challenge has become existential. The 2015 Paris Agreement at COP21 aimed to limit global temperature rises to 1.5–2°C. Yet, more than a decade later, including two US withdrawals, we still lack sufficiently meaningful and immediate action.

If the ultimate responsibility for this collective irresponsibility has largely been placed at the feet of politicians, governments, and global agencies, it is corporate leaders who have continued to pursue their financial growth and profit objectives with only a cursory recognition of the harm they cause to people and the planet. In terms of accountability for their (lack of) actions, there has been very little indeed.

Arnaud Blandin began his presentation by emphasising the urgency of climate and planetary demise. He reflected on frequent interactions with executives about sustainability and the lack of acknowledgement that, even as individuals in competitive markets, they can do better, that the final responsibility is not theirs. Ironically, when governments try to regulate those markets, many still lobby against any restriction to profit from harm to our commonwealth.

Arnaud Blandin's talk addresses a key question: why do corporations consistently turn a blind eye to their impact on the world and the harm they cause to stakeholders, while failing to adopt the necessary changes to preserve our planet and our well-being? Corporations often ignore the values demanded by consumers and society, miss critical opportunities by failing to adapt to change, and neglect to integrate sustainable measures into product design; measures essential for organisational and civilisational success.

Arnaud opened his talk with the image of manta rays gliding through the ocean. His encounter with these graceful creatures crystallised a deeper intuition about business culture: "A manta ray is powerful, but it doesn't fight the ocean… It just belongs." He contrasted this natural alignment with the behaviour of modern corporations: "We became extremely good at moving fast,

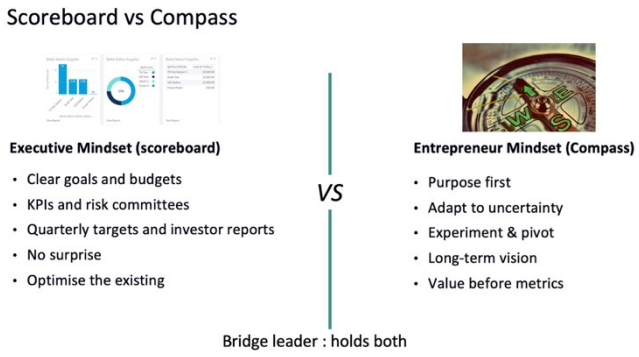
scaling, optimising… but we forgot to ask: do we belong?" Often, we seek to minimise our connection to nature to suit our human objectives.

Arnaud wants to change the sustainability debate. Instead of its frequent framing as a technical challenge or a regulatory burden that sets optimists against pessimists, and activists against business, the real debate should focus on two fundamentally different cultures inside organisations: the executive mindset, built on process, predictability, and risk minimisation, and the entrepreneurial mindset, built on purpose, experimentation, and value creation.

His argument is direct: to contribute to a sustainable future and remain competitive, businesses must rebalance the logics of executives and entrepreneurs. Currently, executive habits dominate. However, meeting planetary and human needs demands entrepreneurial creativity, adaptability, and design-driven thinking.

The Limits of the Executive Scoreboard

Executives, Arnaud argues, operate within a scoreboard, or metrics, logic. Their world is defined by KPIs, budget cycles, risk committees, quarterly targets, and the imperative not to surprise the market. This system is not inherently flawed; it is essential for stability, but it has a structural blind spot: it can "optimise the wrong thing perfectly."



What astonishes Arnaud (and much of the audience) is that, despite clear evidence that atmospheric CO_2 has risen 35% since 1958, with fossil fuels identified as the source, business models remain unchanged.[1] Despite this clarity, calls for action have not grown, and progress has stalled. By some political measures, there has even been a decline.

Arnaud Blandin contrasted this with the exponential growth in computing power. Our smartphones are now over a million times more powerful than the computer that took Armstrong to the moon. This suggests that technology is not the barrier to finding new paths to achieve our goals, but rather that organisational decision-making remains linear, cautious, and slow.

Arnaud concludes: the scoreboard is still calibrated for a world that no longer exists.

[1] Arnaud refers to a 2023 study presented at the European Geosciences Union that provided conclusive proof of the causal link between CO_2 and global warming.

Entrepreneurial Thinking as a Compass

Arnaud argues that entrepreneurs operate with a compass - a mindset that seeks to create value, in contrast to traditional approaches focused on metrics. They start with purpose, adapt to uncertainty, experiment, pivot, and prioritise value. Framing sustainability as a design challenge, this mindset means rethinking products, systems, and business models, not just reporting to benchmarks. Carbon emissions persist due to measurement, costing, and weighting targeting net-zero reductions, while incentives continue to favour the status quo over substantive change.

Entrepreneurial logic helps sustainability because entrepreneurs begin by asking: How can we improve on the status quo? Executives, by contrast, often ask: How can we optimise what already exists? This contrast highlights why executive approaches can miss opportunities for meaningful change.

When Scoreboards Collide with Physics

Arnaud demonstrated how traditional executive habits fail when facing physical limits like carbon emissions, water usage, waste recycling and disposal, and ignore the human dimension - the well-being of employees, consumers, and society. In all four domains, Arnaud Blandin's consistent conclusion is clear: scoreboard logic rarely solves problems that need redesign.

The Human Dimension: A System Under Strain

ESG debates focus mostly on the "E." Arnaud urged the inclusion of broader human aspects. Rising antidepressant use, burnout, youth anxiety, and lower birth rates signal a crisis of well-being; current systems favour the generation of metrics over human flourishing.

He cited Meta and social media to illustrate how powerful systems can produce unintended harm when optimised for engagement. In a leaked internal report, Meta found that deactivating Facebook for a week reduced depression and anxiety, yet the company allegedly avoided both disclosure and deeper investigation. Meta is but one example; Arnaud showed us how scoreboard metrics can distort value creation.

The Need for Bridge Leaders

Arnaud's aim is not to idealise entrepreneurs or demonise executives. Both mindsets matter: executive governance accumulates learnings and stabilises production; entrepreneurs can be reckless and executives rigid. The challenge is that each is stuck in its own logic: entrepreneurs see opportunity but are limited by capital and returns, while executives see risk and are limited by incentives and governance.

His solution is bridge leaders: individuals able to balance execution and innovation. These leaders translate purpose into strategy, strategy into design, and design into impact.

This is the leadership model he sees as essential for the next decade.

Seven Principles for Sustainable Value Creation

Arnaud outlined seven principles bridging entrepreneurial creativity and executive discipline:[2]

- **Purpose aligned with positive impacts**: Purpose must guide decisions, not serve as a slogan.
- **Growth aligned with purpose**: Growth becomes selective, expanding what creates value and stopping what destroys it.
- **Stakeholder alignment as value creation**: Materiality becomes a tool for innovation, not a compliance task.
- **Measured and managed environmental footprint**: Measurement replaces belief; focus and incentives are placed on issues that matter most.
- **Value creation beyond financial metrics**: Sole reliance on financial definitions of performance destroy trust and ecosystems.
- **Resilience and adaptability**: True resilience spans supply chains, water, talent, energy, regulation, and reputation.
- **Truly Impactful**: Impact becomes transparent and meaningful.

These principles help entrepreneurs avoid naivety and executives avoid blindness.

A Redefinition of Leadership

Arnaud Blandin concludes: Sustainability is fundamentally a leadership and value challenge. The organisations that will thrive are those that internalise entrepreneurial creativity at their core, using it not as a side project but as their strategic compass, ensuring innovation, resilience, and real value for society and planet.

The event's Q&A needed little moderation from Thibaud Bastien of the House of Sustainability and Anthony Smith-Meyer of IFIS. A lively discussion covered a broad range of topics, including the boardroom role of taking charge of change decisions impacting existing business models,

[2] Arnaud Blandin will be publishing his book with Palgrave Macmillan on the Seven Principles of a Sustainable Company in the autumn of 2026

resetting incentive frameworks, and finding the courage to view uncertainty as an opportunity rather than as a risk. The board and the executive must, together, envision the most sustainable product designs for their company and embed them in the business strategy in a way that will drive sustainable growth. Indeed, the proposition to rename the Chief Sustainability Officer as Chief Value Architect emphasised the need to ensure that business and sustainability objectives no longer run in parallel but instead fuse into a single purpose.

One of the major takeaways from the discussion referenced board composition and the need to ensure the dominance of directors capable of a broad-scale understanding of the future needs of not only the company in terms of sustainable supply lines, but also how to create positive impact and value for stakeholders such as employees, consumers and society in general.

There is much more to be discussed – perhaps Arnaud will return to continue the conversation?