

# Climate change & COP 15

**By Wayne Visser**

## **Part 1: Extraordinary times (10 December 2009)**

In the midst of the UN Climate Negotiations in Copenhagen, I want to talk about leadership, because I believe this climate agenda – and the wider sustainability agenda – will succeed or fail depending on the quality of leadership that emerges – not only this week, but over the coming decade.

Extraordinary times

Let me begin with something that Unilever CEO, Paul Polman, said in a recent interview. He said that “part of leadership is to look reality in the eye”.

Well, at an event such as COP 15, I hardly need remind anyone that the reality we face on climate change is extremely serious. Not only is the problem potentially catastrophic, but the solution requires nothing short of a second industrial revolution.

This is not a problem we can incrementally manage our way out of. It is a crisis that requires extraordinary leadership – the kind of leadership that creates transformational change on a scale and with an urgency that the world has seldom ever seen before in peace time.

Not only do we face this extraordinary challenge, but our trust in the ability of society’s institutions to deliver the solutions is at an all time low. The latest Edelman Trust Barometer (2009) shows that nearly two-thirds of the public (62%) trust corporations less than they did a year ago. In the US, only 38% said they trust business to do what is right—a 20% plunge since last year—and only 17% said they trust information from a company’s CEO.

## **Part 2: Leadership crisis (11 December 2009)**

This crisis in trust is closely linked to a crisis in leadership.

A McKinsey survey of global executives found that while three quarters (74%) say the CEO/chair should take the lead on socio-political issues (such as climate change), only half (56%) say the CEO/chair is taking such a lead. What’s more, less than 1 in 10 (8%) think that companies are championing environmental and social causes out of genuine concern.

In the US, almost a third (27%) of executives claim not to be playing any leadership role on public issues like climate change, and only 14% claim to be playing a direct, active role. And yet, almost half (44%) of US executives feel their peers should be taking a leadership role public issues, with only one-seventh believe they are actually doing so.

So much for the numbers; what are the implications for leadership? The same McKinsey survey may give us a clue: Of those who claim not to be playing any role in leadership on public issues, 71% cite 'business reasons', while of those who say they are playing a role, 64% cite 'personal reasons'. This suggests that – in order to have transformational leadership on climate change – we need to look at both the business 'rules of the game' and the role of individual leaders.

Interestingly, this conclusion dovetails nicely with the leadership research coming out of academia, which emphasises importance of both the context for leadership and the individual traits of leaders.

### **Part 3: Leadership response (12 December 2009)**

What we need, therefore, is to strengthen the societal context – though increased public awareness and customer activism – and the market context – through stronger public policy and price incentives. This is what leadership author Manfred De Vries calls the architectural role of leaders – and that is what we see the world's leaders here in Copenhagen striving to do: to redesign the 'rules of the game'.

Beyond the societal and market context, however, we also need to enable individual leaders to emerge – both as strategic navigators at the helm of their organisations, and as embedded catalysts at all levels of organisation and society.

We may ask: what types of leaders are we looking for to take us through the climate crisis? There are many theories on leadership styles and traits, but it seems to me that we will need all kinds of leadership to emerge. Times of crisis *do* call for heroic, charismatic leaders, but quiet, servant leaders are equally needed.

Many leadership traits will come into their own in the years ahead, as climate change intensifies and we transition to a low-carbon economy. We will look to leaders with an ability to craft a compelling alternative vision in the midst of business-as-usual, to think systemically about solutions in the midst of reactionary politics, to call for action in the midst of inertia and to foster hope in the midst of despair.

The good news is we do not have to wait for these leaders to be born. We at CPSL firmly believe – and we are supported by modern leadership research in this – that leaders are made, not born. For 20 years, we have been nurturing leaders to take on the sustainability challenge. Now their time has come, and we start to see them stepping forward, through initiatives like the Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change and the 1,000 CEOs that have committed themselves and their companies to the Copenhagen Communiqué.

It is true that it will not be easy; nor will all who tackle the challenge, succeed. But that is the challenge of leadership.

I started by saying that we need extraordinary leadership for extraordinary times, and I quoted Unilever CEO, Paul Polman. Now, I would like to end with something else he said, because I believe it captures some of the essence of what it means to be a leader for sustainability. He says, "I hope that the word *integrity* comes into that. I hope the

word *long-term* comes into that. I hope the word *caring* comes into that, but *demanding* at the same time."

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Part 1 (10 December 2009): <https://csrinternational.blogspot.com/2009/12/climate-change-cop-15-part-1.html>; Part 2 (11 December 2009):

<https://csrinternational.blogspot.com/2009/12/climate-change-cop-15-part-2-leadership.html>; Part 3 (12 December 2009):

<https://csrinternational.blogspot.com/2009/12/climate-change-cop-15-part-3-leadership.html>