



Premise – In this book, former Unilever CEO Paul Polman and sustainable business expert Andrew Winston explore 50 years of corporate dogma. To thrive today and tomorrow, they argue, companies must become “net positive” – giving more than to the world than they take.

A net positive company:

- Improves the lives of everyone it touches, from customers and suppliers to employees and communities;
- Takes ownership of all the societal and environmental impacts that its business model creates;
- Provides opportunities for innovation, savings, and building more humane and purpose-driven culture; and
- Partners with competitors, civil society, and governments to drive transformational change.

The book sets out the principles and practises that will empower you and your organisation to succeed and deliver the change the world so desperately needs.

### What is Net Positive?

A net positive business serves others. It follows the oldest moral guidepost we have, the Golden Rule, or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” To live by the Rule, a net positive business lives within natural boundaries or thresholds to respect the planet and its inhabitants. It observes moral boundaries for how we treat each other, and tries to repair, restore, reinvigorate, and regenerate.

The author’s vision of net positive is *a business that improves the well-being for everyone it impacts and at all scales – every product, every operation, every region and country, and for every stakeholder, including employees, suppliers, communities, customers, and even future generations and the planet itself*

This is the North Star. No company can achieve all aims at once, but it’s where we should be heading if we want a viable economy and planet. To exist as a relevant business today is to enrich the world.

*The ultimate question is this: Is the world better off because your business is in it?*

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Obviously, I still recommend that you purchase and read it plus other seminal books I’ve summarised, including ...

Happy reading,

Wiet Pruijm



## 1. You break the World, You Own It

### Core Principles of a Net Positive Company

Five core principles - that center on responsibility - will take company performance to a new level. They help corporate leaders expand their horizons, rethink their jobs, and reshape the role of business in society.

These attributes, fully embraced, separate the net positive companies from the merely well-run and well-meaning businesses:

- Ownership of all impacts and consequences, intended or not;
- Operating for the long-term benefit of business and society;
- Creating positive returns for all stakeholders;
- Driving shareholder value as a result, not a goal; and
- Partnering to drive systemic change.

Our problems are big, so we need businesses and their leaders to play at a different level and bring their “A Game.”

The top-notch companies will also need to nail the basics. Underlying the five net positive principles is a more fundamental one supporting them all: nothing about the new model undermines the need to properly run a business. Pursuing net positive is only possible if it’s built on top of strong foundations and an uncompromising culture of performance.

### What Net Positive Companies Do to Develop More Responsible Core Principles

- Develop a deep understanding of and take responsibility for how the business affects the world, from operations to value chains, and from communities to the planet.
- Broaden the meaning of a business:
  - **Value chain.** Work to optimise not just their own businesses, but suppliers’ operations and customers’ lives as well.
  - **Time.** Seek compounding benefits over the long term, for the business and the world.
  - **Stakeholders.** Look beyond the obvious employee and customers to a full array of those connected to the business.
  - **Money.** Rethink how to invest capital and reduce the focus on investors and their rewards.
  - **Independence.** Move away from a go-it-alone or “it wasn’t invented here” mentality to be open to real partnership.

## 2. How Much Do You Care?

### Becoming a Courageous, Net Positive Leader

Twentieth-century economics developed models where people and organisations coldly maximise utility. It doesn’t have to be this way. We can pursue success and wealth, but also fairness, justice and equity.

There are evergreen leadership skills that were important fifty years ago and will be fifty years from now. Effective leaders share traits, such as discipline, toughness and holding people to high standards, strategic thinking, intelligence, curiosity, and a desire to understand key drivers of a business-like technology. In today’s volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous world, other traits, in particular adaptability and resilience, become critical as well.

But leading a net positive business takes more than the basics. The best leaders, the ones people will want to follow into this new territory, are first and foremost good human beings.

Net positive leadership is all about putting others’ interests ahead of your own. It helps to know your strengths and passions as well. The sweet spot is leading in the overlap of what you’re good at, what you like, and what the world needs. Getting there might require developing new skills and leaving your comfort zone.

The authors see five critical traits that help create a net positive leader:

- A sense of purpose, duty, and service;
- Empathy: a high level of compassion, humility and humanity;
- More courage;
- The ability to inspire and show moral leadership; and
- Seeking transformative partnerships.

### What Net Positive Companies Do to Foster Courageous, Caring Leadership

- Ask, “ what kind of world would we want if we did not know in what circumstances we were born into?” (The “veil of ignorance”)
- Cultivate a sense of responsibility and duty to serve the world and encourage people to bring their values to work.
- Help people in the business find what they do uniquely for the world (their purpose).
- Embrace empathy, compassion, and humility, and openly seek help from partners and others.
- Reward courage and do what’s right even if there are costs.

## 3. Unlock the Company’s Soul

### Discovering Organisational and Employee Purpose

Finding personal and organisational meaning is not a soft-hearted, anti-business strategy. In fact, satisfying basic human needs [we want to *acquire* and *defend*, *bond* with others and to *comprehend* our world] is a powerful path to business success.

A net positive company will work to satisfy all four drivers for its employees. Importantly, it will improve their lives by giving well paid jobs, but mainly by helping to discover and unlock their purpose - letting them connect heart and brain.

That work begins by finding the organisation’s purpose.

There is nothing more powerful for an organisation than getting to the heart of why it exists, and then making that purpose come alive. It ripples through the company and builds trust with consumers, suppliers, communities, and other stakeholders. You’ll know that purpose is core to strategy if you can answer yes to these five questions. Does the purpose...

- Contribute to increasing your company’s growth and profitability today?
- Significantly influence your strategic decisions and investment choices?
- Shape your core value propositions?
- Affect how you build and manage your team and organisational capabilities?
- Take up part of the agenda of your leadership and board meetings, every time?

### Net Positive Companies do the following to Find Their Purpose and Unlock Higher Performance

- Go back to their roots to understand the original purpose of the company and its reason for being, and to leverage the company’s DNA to serve stakeholders better.
- Look forward to understand how the world’s needs will evolve and where the company’s purpose can best serve the world.
- Get their house in order and invest in people, brands, and innovation to hasten their pursuit of net positive.
- Send the right signals and set policies that drive net positive thinking and behaviour.
- Help top executives become authentic leaders and be consistent in word and deed to live the company’s purpose.
- Enable all employees to find their own purpose and connect it to the company’s.

## 4. Blow Up Boundaries

### Thinking Big and Setting Aggressive, Net Positive Goals

Breaking the sound barrier, running a four-minute mile, surviving in space. Each of these seemed impossible... and then they became commonplace.

Consider the goals of a net positive company to be the four-minute mile barrier for business. It seems impossible, but the chase is exciting, and when the barrier breaks, the floodgates will open. Once you see it done, it’s doable. Green energy was too expensive, but now it’s cheaper than fossil fuel in most of the world.

Going further and finding ways to not just cut a negative impact, but creating a positive handprint, can seem daunting. But unlike breaking the speed of sound, which was not required for humanity to thrive, attaining net positive goals is essential for our economy and society to flourish over the long term.

The bigger goals - usually ones that start with “zero” or “all” - expand horizons and force that all-important systems thinking. If your targets don’t make you uncomfortable, you’re not pushing hard enough.

You’ll need two things in place to help the organisation set net positive goals: an understanding of what the world needs (an outside-in view) and more freedom to think big (the space to succeed).

### What Net Positive Companies Do to Blow Up Boundaries

- Understand the thresholds shaping the world, both biophysical and societal or moral, and assess how their business will fare in a world that lives within those limits.
- Question what business they’re really in and whether the current model is fit for the future.
- Remove rigid constraints on what the company can work on, and give people space to think big, work for the long-term, and invest in the future.
- Set aggressive goals that move a company toward a net positive and are, at a *minimum*, science-based; cover the suppliers and consumers; and inspire the company to improve its handprint, not only reduce its footprint.
- Use the reverse goal challenge and reconsider every goal by asking, What are we *not* committing to do? - and seeing whether they’re proud of that target.

## 5. Be an Open Book

### Building Trust and Transparency

There’s an old saying that Warren Buffet likes: “Only when the tide goes out do you discover who’s been swimming naked.” In a world demanding openness about everything, the tide is always going out. If you have a good handle on the problems in your (or your partners’) operations - and you’re working towards solutions in a genuine, consistent way - then you are in great shape, and transparency isn’t threatening. But if something is out of line with your stated values and goals, such as a human rights violation in the supply chain, the tide going out will be embarrassing.

Trust, backed by transparency, is a powerful combination. They are enablers of net positive work, and they create goodwill and intangible value.

The five paths the authors believe companies should embrace to build trust are:

- Share your plans, your successes and failures;
- Tell people what they want to know (and don’t hold back);
- Put the needs of communities ahead of your own;
- Be transparent with trustworthy critics; and
- When in doubt, do the right thing.

If you’re trusted, you’ll get a seat at the table for important conversations. As trust builds, longtime critics may come to you for assistance. Be an open book and the potential for successful partnerships grows exponentially.

### What Net Positive Companies Do to Build Trust p135

- Start always with transparency and being open about what they’re trying to accomplish.
- Work with society by proactively inviting them in instead of waiting for them to bang on - or knock down - the door.
- Develop shared goals for society, working with stakeholders.
- Publish reports on their progress and start open discussions about successes and failures - they ask for help.
- When entering into new markets or partnerships, start with what they can do for stakeholders, not themselves.
- Stand up and speak out to support their values, especially when it’s hard; they are courageous about using their voice.

## 6. Make 1+1=11

### Creating Partnerships with Synergies and Multiplier Effects

To fight the battle against our environmental and social challenges, we need the rapid expansion of productivity that comes from partnership. No company can make a serious dent in the problems that a whole industry, or the world, faces.

The authors highlight six approaches to net positive partnerships with varying and expanding partners:

- Within your value chain;
- Within your industry;
- Across sectors;
- With civil society;
- With government; and
- In multistakeholder groups.

The difference in these collaborations is the overall purpose and approach. They are all intended to serve the larger good as much as help the partners themselves, and have impact, scale, and staying power.

### What Net Positive Companies Do...

#### ...to Maximise Value Chain Impact

- Take responsibility for their total value chain impacts and assess areas with the biggest potential for collaboration.
- Treat suppliers as partners and family, not as low-cost providers of commodities, and look for joint value creation versus value transfer.
- Build trust and transparency with their suppliers and customers through aligned objectives and incentives, and in some cases, open books.
- Identify large challenges holding back the industry, and large opportunities to improve lives, or test new technology together.
- Start and end with the citizens they serve in mind.

#### ...to Shift Their Own Industry

- Leads sector partnerships to address the biggest shared hurdles and opportunities to help the world thrive.
- Gather a critical mass, roughly 25 percent of sector production or more, to work together and create tipping points.
- Worry less about who gets the credit, or how to compete on issues and focus on broader solutions.

- Identify operational shift that save everyone money, resources, and footprint.
  - Develop joint standards, such as how to best measure sustainability performance, or science-based goals that members individually, and the whole sector, can shoot for.
- ...to Solve Problems across Sectors
- Identify key challenges that cross industries and form broader coalitions to solve them – issues such as education, joint energy buying, human rights, labor laws, and climate change are some of the many that offer fertile ground.
  - Develop new business models by putting likely industries together.
  - View the responsibility to stakeholders extending beyond their own industry footprint.

#### ...to Build Successful partnerships with Civil Society

- Work with NGOs and communicate strategically, not solely in philanthropic CSR initiatives, and make these partnerships and integral part of their longer-term strategy.
- Embed these efforts in their businesses by focusing their NGO and community work where they can best improve well-being through their business and their brands.
- Treat civil society organisations as equal partners and cherish their advocacy for the voice of the people.

#### ...to Work Productively with Governments

- Use their knowledge and skills to help governments develop capacity, improving the business operating environment for all.
- Seek areas where the playing field needs to be leveled and governments are willing to actively engage.
- Don't walk away from governments they don't agree with, but try to partner and improve the well-being of citizens.
- Understand what's short-term and political versus what needs to be focused on for the long term.

#### ...with Multistakeholder Groups

- Lead multistakeholder collaborations, inviting all the players that are needed, no matter how complicated it gets.
- Look holistically at their operations and communities to find gaps and opportunities to improve well-being.
- Explore innovative business and finance models to solve societal problems in new ways.

## 7. It takes Three to Tango

### Systems-Level Reset and Net Positive Advocacy

The 1+1=11 partnership within either a sector or a value chain are not enough to manage the major global challenges we need to solve together.

Big picture solutions need all three pillars of society – public sector, private sector, and civil society – working together, dancing a complicated tango. With everyone at the table, we can shift entire systems for the well-being of all.

The authors identify four end goals of collaboration that combine advocacy (the “say”) and action (the “do”) to bring about real change.

### What Net Positive Companies Do...

#### ...to Speak Out Collectively

- Lead public statements of commitment to large-scale action and use their leverage with peers to get others on board.
- Use public commitments to draw more stakeholders into the discussion and apply pressure, through net positive advocacy, on governments.

#### ...to Guide Policy toward the Common Good

- Engage with policy makers before laws are written and work together versus coming in afterwards to complain or lobby for change.

#### ...to Help Countries Thrive

- Proactively propose solutions rather than waiting for regulation that's sure to come.
- Advocate for broader solutions to shared problems that, even if they benefit the company, benefit everyone.
- Show up as a trusted partner when it's *not* expected or when there is nothing directly in it for them.
- Add to the fabric of a country, not look for opportunities to get money out of the region.

#### ...to Tackle the Largest Societal Issues

- Lead the work on the biggest, most complex shared problems.
- Listen to smart critics to understand systematic challenges and hurdles
- Assemble the full coalition needed, often including finance, to create systemic solutions.
- Go beyond just raising standards for suppliers to helping them solve the hurdles standing in the way of more sustainable operations.

## 8. Embrace the Elephants

### Managing Issues Nobody Wants to Talk About ... but We Can't Avoid

The authors explore 9 issues that they feel can't be ignored anymore: taxes, corruption, executive compensation, paying the wrong shareholders, unprepared boards, human rights, trade association lobbying, money in politics, and broader diversity and inclusions. For each elephant they outline the problem and solutions.

### The elephants all share a few key dimensions:

- They are core parts of the current economic system that has created the climate and inequality crises;
- A company can't be net positive without addressing them, since the status quo reduces society's well-being;
- Business either does not want to work on them proactively (at least not transparently) or doesn't know how;
- There's a growing risk to the business and brand for those who do nothing; and
- There are few easy answers – these are tough call with gray areas.

There's no clear path to addressing the elephants, but there are actionable steps to take now, even if they only solve part of the problem.

The author's goal in listing them is to put them firmly on the business radar, not as nice-to-haves, but as requirements.

### What Net Positive Companies Do to Tackle Critical, Ignored Issues

- Proactively face those “elephants in the room” that most have avoided and work in an authentic way to address them.
- Identify how their business contribute to our largest challenges, and, in particular, focus on inequality driven by the hoarding of power and money.
- Look honestly at how they spend their money – through taxes, corruption, overpaying executives, money in politics, short-term share buybacks, and so on – and consider how they undercut the company's long-term prospects and damage society.
- Lead on human rights and valuing people in their supply chain.
- Develop an inclusive workforce and value chain, identifying those most often left behind and bringing them into the system to share their skills.

## 9. Culture is the Glue

### Putting Values into Action, Deep in the Organisation and Brands

Culture is values in motion. If values are the core beliefs, and purpose is your “why”, then culture is how you show it all through your behaviours. It's an aggregation of company beliefs consistently put into action.

Peter Drucker said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”. It's basically true, the authors argue - but lacks nuance – culture and strategy are both stronger if they are in sync.

A net positive culture consistently acts on values such as responsibility, care and empathy, service, trust, openness, and high performance. Building this culture takes time and commitment to the strategies laid out (in the book) – blowing up boundaries, building trust through transparency, forming deep partnerships, and embracing the elephants.

When the values, purpose and culture align, the business becomes the place where people want to work. When you create a culture that's fits the mission and responds to the world and the moment, we're in it, it provides a common language for everyone in the company. It's the glue that binds people together to serve the world.

### What Net Positive Companies Do to Build a Powerful, Purposeful Culture

- Demonstrate values and culture through leadership, role modelling, and consistent behaviour.
- Embed a culture of purpose and service to the world by using business processes and tools that drive it into the core of the business.
- Incorporate a net positive mindset into all activities – R&D, marketing, finance, and so on; this is a team sport.
- Revitalise old businesses through purpose and culture, acquire purpose-led brands that bring entrepreneurial spirit into the culture, and build new products from the ground up, aiming for net positive in every dimension.
- Connect the company's culture (values in motion) to the world in ways that inspire and motivate employees and stakeholders and help reinforce and deepen that culture.
- Influence the culture in the communities or countries around the company, and challenge norms that are discriminatory or go against their values – they stand up for what's right.

## 10. Net Positive World

### Looking Around the Corner to Greater Challenges and Opportunities

The closer you are to net positive, the better you can drive the changes that need to come. You're more resilient and can contribute even more to the larger good. You'll also be able to look around the corner at what's coming.

The authors raise 6 society-level challenges that a net positive 2.0 company will (need to) take on:

- Be even more responsible for broader impacts (do more good);
- Challenge consumption and growth
- Rethink the measures and structures of success (such as GDP);
- Improve the social contract: focus on livelihoods;
- Bend the curve on capitalism and overhaul finance; and
- Defend democracy and science, two pillars of

society.

### What Net Positive Companies Do...

#### ...to Take More Responsibility

- Expand their visions and look hard at how the existence of the business affects society; they cast a wide net and look at the effects of effects.
- Consider their influence on policy and systems through action and *inaction*, asking, What are we enabling through silence?
- Ask how to improve their societal footprint, the broadest level of impact, and what they would need to do to create positive Scope 6 Value (human and natural world well-being).

#### ...to Challenge Consumption and Growth

- Make regenerative approaches the default option in all they do; they seek to become net contributors not takers.
- Proactively use renewables or alternative materials.

- Talk to customers and consumers to understand what they really want out of a product or service, a need that may be satisfied with less materials.
- Set clear goals around absolute resource reduction and ensure full recyclability and reuse.
- Integrate nature positive and climate positive solutions into design.

#### ...to Rethink the Measures of Success

- Actively engage in the development of a fuller set of metrics to measure company success, stakeholder well-being, and a thriving economy and society.
- Consider what alternative ownership and incorporation models like Benefit and B corporations, co-ops, ESOPs, and Evergreen Direct Investment would mean for business.
- Go well beyond minimal requirements to publish broader ESG governance measures, and clearly link them to value creation.

#### ...to Improve the Social Contract

- Think of labor (people) not as a cost, but as an asset to nurture.
- Ensure basic principles of human rights and livable wages across the value chain.
- Actively develop strategies to combat inequality and ensure just transactions where jobs are changing.
- Collaborate with suppliers, governments, and civil society to eradicate modern slavery.
- Embrace the challenge of solving broader social problems like refugees, youth unemployment, and skill development.

#### ...to Bend the Curve of Capitalism

- Price externalities, put a price on carbon on their operations, collect real money, and invest it in reducing carbon emissions more.
- Use corporate political power to aggressively advocate for a regulatory price on carbon.
- Work in collaboration with NGOs and others to

put directionally correct prices on hard-to-measure natural resources like water & land use.

- Encourage the financial system to value ESG and the long-term by shifting their own investments to sustainable investing and by pro-actively talking to their investors about how the company's ESG work creates value.

#### ...to Defend the Pillars of Society

- Get off the sidelines and speak out publicly, alone or collectively, to protect democracy, freedom, science, and truth.
- Work to correct misconceptions that their own employees may have.
- Find ways to use the power of the business, like supply chain purchasing, to fight dangerous policies.
- Take the long-term view to work directly with communities, even in countries with serious human rights or democracy issues – it's better to be part of the change than run from it.