

Speaker 2:

It's one thing to be a business first mover that literally reinvents the product category. It's another altogether to maintain that leadership for decades and inspire ongoing industry transformation, especially when the world and marketplace we live in today presents so many headwinds to every business. But with the right integrity, actions, and accountability, purposeful companies can not only accelerate growth but sustain leadership over the long term.

Today's guest is the CEO of a brand that's become a household name, an exemplar of a purposeful and profitable business that's transformed consumer behavior. She reveals what a company must do internally to manifest ongoing growth and impact, while also empowering everyone inside the organization to become a force multiplier for the business. So if you want to know how purpose can propel and perpetuate your growth and impact, listen in now.

From We first in Goal17 Media, welcome to Lead with We. I'm Simon Mainwaring, and each week I talk with purposeful business and thought leaders about the revolutionary mindsets and methods you can use to build your bottom line and a better future for all of us. And today I'm joined by Alison Whritenour, CEO of Seventh Generation, a home care products company selling eco-friendly cleaning, paper and personal care items with a focus on sustainability and the conservation of natural resources. And we'll discuss how an industry leader re-imagines its role to unlock new innovations, products and impact, and how a purpose-led company of any size can accelerate and scale that impact in ways that inspire all stakeholders to build its business. So Alison, welcome to Lead with We

Speaker 3:

Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Speaker 2:

It is such a pleasure to have you here because I think there's few brands that kind of really stand out as leaders in the businesses of Force for Good movement as clearly Seventh Generation. You really were ahead of the game and I know that was inspired by the origin of the term Seventh Generation. So for those who don't know of the company, could you just give us a little top line about who Seventh Generation is and the thinking behind how it was born?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, great. So today, Seventh Generation is a company that makes natural home cleaning products. But we are on a mission to transform the world into a healthy, sustainable and equitable place for the next seven generations. And actually our whole business principle is inspired by the law of the great Iroquois that in every decision we make, we think about the next seven generations. So it's really about long-term systemic thinking rather than short-term decision-making.

Speaker 2:

I love that because there's an expression I've heard that we are all future ancestors, in the sense that generations to come will look back at us and say, "What world did you leave us with? And what was the consequence, not only in your own lives, but those that followed you." So it's such a powerful proposition and you hear more and more, whether it's COP27 or COP15, business at large and companies talking about intergenerational responsibility. Why is it so important? I mean, give us a bit of a sense of what motivated the company in the first place, but I get a sense that it's even more important today than ever.

Speaker 3:

So our company has been around for about 34 years. So a lot of people don't know that about us so we oftentimes think about ourselves as the world's oldest [inaudible 00:03:30] startup and sometimes. But we really started, our founders, Jeffrey Hollender and Alan Newman, started with this idea that a company could drive change. That was truly it. So I think we started actually as a mail order catalog that sold hundreds of eco-friendly products, everything from recycled toilet paper to cement blocks that you would put at the top of your toilet bowl to lower the water pressure. Super interesting in a way, ahead of its time, and really just represented this idea that you as a consumer could make better choices. And it really just grew from there. And I think what has been very important in the work today is the fact that long-term decisions really matter and are not the norm. So short-term decision-making is the world that we operate in, and so how do we just break the mold and show what's possible?

Speaker 2:

And I think there's such a powerful tension in what you just said there because when there's a crisis it's very natural for human beings to contract the horizon line and just worry about tomorrow because there's an issue. But to solve for our future we've got to have that longer term horizon in mind and make choices on that basis today in terms of the products we use and buy. Would you say that's fair or...

Speaker 3:

It's totally fair, but I think the crux of the issue though is that that's just not human nature. And so I think as humans we're designed to focus on me, on what I need right now. And so the intersection of what we do is how do we help someone solve a future problem? By showing them something that they need today and can really help them both solve an immediate need while also paying dividends to their future.

Speaker 2:

And you touched on something which is a challenge to every single business executive or founder, something they faced, which is how do you inspire and therefore educate a consumer that a better choice exists and B, it's to their advantage to make that choice. So as a leader in this field for so long, how do you take on the consumer engagement piece so that it's not just you putting better products out there, but human nature is defaulting to its worst successes, but rather they join you in [inaudible 00:05:47]?

Speaker 3:

I mean this is the center of our work. I need more consumers to buy more of our products in order for us to do the good in the world. And interestingly, we do that pretty much the same as many other companies: we solve problems. So I think the first thing that we always talk about with our consumer communications team is really just making sure that we can help people to understand how these products work. So I think for us in the categories that we're in, laundry detergent needs to clean your clothes. And that is always the first problem that we're there to solve. And then from there we open the door to say, "But it can be done in a better way. So let me talk to you about these plant-based ingredients or let me talk to you about this better packaging and let me bring you on this journey about how you can still get to a great performing product, but just with better ingredient that ultimately leaves less impact on the world."

Speaker 2:

So let's talk about that calibration. Because it doesn't matter what widget you're taking to market, if it is more responsible for the future there's always that dialogue around, "Is it a silver bullet?" Will they buy it for that reason or more is it an insurance policy where they buy it because it works but then they like the fact that it's also doing good? Where are we in that sort of balancing act?

Speaker 3:

Oh, so it's always changing. I think it's a little bit of both, but I would say most of our new consumers are coming in first through this being a product that they're interested in trying and it served a need at home. And then we invite them in to learn more about how the product is made or the unique ecosystem from which the materials are derived from. And so that's one route. But then you have your diehard eco-friendly consumers who are going to come to you by way of researching PCR, post-consumer recycled plastic or plant-based ingredients. So it tends to be a mix, but I would say largely most of our new folks are coming in because they got to get their clothes cleaned.

Speaker 2:

Right. And I'm going to lean into this a little bit more only because I think we all struggle with audience segmentation and how we go to market. Do you actually identify those various target audiences in very specific ways and calibrate the content and messaging for them? Or do you enable their engagement through the products you're making and really lean into the product storytelling?

Speaker 3:

So certainly the first that you spoke to, I think. So we focus very much on understanding who our consumer is and really segmenting communication from there. And in fact, that has become even more important over the last couple of years where obviously consumers are living in a much more complex world. So where we can just get more focused on knowing exactly who we're talking to, exactly what type of messaging they need to hear from us, it really just helps us to really fine tune the types of consumers that we're able to get to come in and try our products.

Speaker 2:

And so how do you think of yourself internally? Because I mean the culture of a company is so determinative in terms of their success and their products and consumer goodwill. Do you see yourself as an innovation company or are you a CPG company or... What's the vibe, for want of a better word.

Speaker 3:

Oh goodness. Well, I think about this all the time because certainly we make products. So there's the CPT aspect to what we do. But in terms of our marketing and our advocacy, sometimes we behave more like one of our partners in terms of trying to generate systemic change than we do actually trying to get people to buy more products. So we're somewhere in the middle. And actually that part to me is the most exciting part, because really what we're trying to do is drive change in the world. And our products or our communications are just a vehicle to really help enable that.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, it's an interesting mindset. You really got to see consumers as a partner in this, not in a transactional kind of way. And do you think of yourself, what's the larger ambition? Is it to work with

competitors? To sort of upgrade the entire industry? Or is it work with all stakeholders to build a movement that drives change? How do you characterize it?

Speaker 3:

So both of those things certainly are important for us. So I think big picture, I talk a lot about stakeholder mapping and stakeholder engagement. And that can be anything from our industry partners, our retail partners, our boards. So we have kind of multiple board that we work with as Seventh Generation, or even our competitors.

So all of these belong in our stakeholder map and they all play a different role. So one of the big initiatives that we're working on right now is trying to move our entire laundry detergent line to be concentrated. So we've gone so far as to say, "We're going to discontinue our laundry detergent, our un-concentrated laundry detergent by 2030." But in order to do that, it's the deep stakeholder engagement with our retail partners and with our competitors because we know that we are not enough to move the industry alone. So it's going to take deep category management, it's going to take transformational shelves and transformational consumer communications to make it happen. So with each one of our initiatives, so it's probably three or four other stakeholders that we need to come on this journey [inaudible 00:11:16] in order for us to be able to create the change that we need for the consumers in the world around us.

Speaker 2:

I love that you shared that, because I mean the end result is consumers are partners in this change. And the reality is if people don't act and think and buy differently, no amount of good intentions is going to change everything. And that's on me, that's on you. It's every single day, every single decision we make. So when you go to make that sort of sales pitch to retail partners and so on, how do you stand out from the growing noise of other good-for-you, good-for-the-planet brands out there? I mean, it's a good problem to have that more people are kind of stepping into the purpose ESG climate space, but at the same time it's more competition. So how do you command their attention?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, great. So I think the first thing that we do, certainly as folks who have tremendous amount of history, is just really talking about impact. And so when I'll enter a conversation, let's hang on the concentrated laundry detergent for a second, I think the conversation that we are managing with our retailers is, "What's the impact that we can have together?" And following the laundry example, just picturing the laundry aisle: you're walking down a laundry detergent aisle, it is filled with heavy plastic jugs. Like this is right for disruption.

And so we invite them on the journey, we'll talk about our point of view. So for us, we believe that these three tools are going to be the consumer choices to enable this, but we also need to recommend other partners coming in the mix in that. And so typically we'll invite a couple of other competitive brands who have like-minded formats to say, "Actually how do we carve out a set together? Or how do we really work on our communications so that way we're training consumers to really understand the same benefits of these products." So it usually leads with our perspective, with our solutions as a company, but then also really what we need other folks to do with us. Because again, we're not going to drive the change ourselves, nor would we want to, in order to make sure that consumers can really see the opportunity for themselves to adopt different types of formats.

Speaker 2:

The bar gets higher and higher as we become more responsible because a lot of ways it's almost like certification whack-a-mole out there. You've got fair trade, organic, climate neutral. You've got all of these different planes by different companies out there as well. I asked that because my larger question is how do you make something like a different type of laundry detergent sexy to somebody who's time poor, attention poor, pocketbook poor, and they just want to get their stuff and go. How do you command their attention?

Speaker 3:

Great. So again, it all comes down to solving consumer problems. So I'll take concentrated laundry detergent as a great example. If I were to come to you and say, "I have this great laundry detergent that's eight times concentrated and it saves 60% of the plastic that you would use in a regular detergent," you would be like, "That's cool, but it probably wouldn't be enough for you to change your behavior." But if I were to come to you and I would say, "I have this concentrated laundry detergent that is eight times smaller than the one that you use today, but it will save you tremendous amount of time because you only need to squeeze it once and it's the perfect dose," then I'm solving a problem for you that benefits your lives. And so once I've been able to get to you with this idea that I can really help make your immediate world better, then I'm really able to introduce some of the more environmentally friendly or sustainable attributes of the product. So it's about the steps in messaging for us that I think really make the difference in capturing consumer attention.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, and as you say the brand equity you built over time builds a level of trust that people kind of look to you for guidance. And I have to say, what you mentioned is so important. I'm the guy, whether it's a laundry detergent or a dishwashing detergent or whatever, who opens the bottle, tips it too much and half the darn bottle pours out of the neck. I'm that guy and I just want to-

Speaker 3:

See, we could help you.

Speaker 2:

Seriously, it drives me absolutely nuts. A, that I'm this old and incapable of doing this well. But B, that the product itself isn't set up in a way to be responsible in terms of how it's used. It's crazy. And you mentioned the different stakeholders have to be at the table, retailers and others as well as consumers. But also I'm sure to make these changes possible, you've got to advocate a lot within the industry for changes, for the removal of certain elements or not. Because I'm sure that those harmful elements are there for a reason, they're cheaper, they're more available, or whatever it is. So how much of your work is advocacy, if you want to kind of execute against your purpose?

Speaker 3:

It's absolutely a stakeholder that needs to be part of any initiative that you are working towards. Then advocacy can play many different roles. It could be advocating for ingredient change and ingredient disclosure, or it could be working with local partners to make sure that local issues, or in our case, frontline communities being most impacted by climate, are really being brought to the surface for visibility, awareness and call to action. And that's the really important piece of the work that we do. Because if we're only selling products, that's just benefiting us. But really it's about how do we make

sure that it's about the change that we want to drive in the world and we're leaving the world a better place behind us.

Speaker 2:

And then how do you navigate what is an increasingly kind of perilous landscape? Because at one extreme you saw, I think it was in 2015 when Starbucks spoke to the issue of racism and baristas were talking about it, Race Together and so on. And there was a lot of backlash. On the other hand, you see CO 27 and there's a lot of concerns about green washing and so on, especially the amount of capital that's gone to ESG funds and those sorts of things. The consumer's hearing lots of different things. On one hand they might say, "Hey, don't tell me what to think or do." On the other hand they're saying, "Hey, you're just putting a good picture on this." So how do you carve out that integrity in the minds of your consumers so you're not lost in that mix?

Speaker 3:

Yeah. So the first thing I think that's super important is that integrity just doesn't show up overnight. I think how you are wired as a company for your authenticity, your clarity, your transparency with consumers from day one is mission critical. So I feel super fortunate that I get to lead a company where these attributes of how transparent we are, how clear we are, the trust that we built with consumers, this now lives in the DNA of how we operate. And this is what consumers know us for. It's also the precedent that has been set for me as a leader to come in and navigate.

And so we've been able to do this for the last 34 years, is really beyond the ground and build that trust. But I think that is really table stakes for a lot of companies that are entering this space is you really need to know what you stand for and you really need to be able to be willing to go out on the line for the things that you stand for and show consumers that you are with them on the journey. And when you do that and you demonstrate that, I think that really becomes the biggest proof point that people can listen and believe what you're talking about.

Speaker 2:

I absolutely agree. I mean sometimes we get asked in our work at We First, where's the biggest mistake can you see in purpose or sustainability focused companies? And it's in the doing. You can state all the lofty aspirations you want, but it's you win or lose in the doing. Let me ask you then, how do you foster that internally? [inaudible 00:18:49] love you to peel back the curtain a little bit on the culture that must be nurtured inside a special organization like yours. From a strategic point of view you've defined your purpose, your missions, those sorts of things I imagine. But also how do you foster the culture? Especially when I'm sure a lot of folks are remote these days.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, so this is an excellent question and it's a really interesting one. So I've been with Seventh Generation for a little over a decade. So in many ways I have grown up in this system of how you really get somebody to understand how to be a part of a company like this. And I can tell you through my lived experience and now leading the company, that it's an every day, it's an every decision, it's an every function's responsibility to lead the mission of the company. And I think for us, it cross-functionally integrated how we think about both the mission delivery and then also how we make decisions. So where I started the conversation I talked about how we focus on long-term decision-making, not short-term decision-making. In terms of how we pick product ingredients, material packaging, how we

communicate with consumers, suppliers that we work with, our supply chain overall, this is every decision that we make.

And so really as a company, we sit down and we talk about these things around the table together. And that really just permeates through the culture. And so I expect my leaders to be able to sync with this mentality and then I expect them to be able to lead their teams that way. And then the other really important piece of our decision-making is how we think about cross-functional teams. So we do have a separate division, we call it corporate consciousness, but in some other companies it would be your sustainability and advocacy arm. They are at the table with us for our leadership team decisions. And that becomes an integral link in holding accountability for these decisions that we make and not letting us off the hook when short-term decisions are on the horizon. And so those are just a couple of the things that I've observed just as a member of this community and now leading it that really help you to practice what you preach.

Speaker 2:

Now there's a couple of things I want to call out there, which is so powerful for the folks who are listening. The first is that it's a co-creative exercise. You expect the other leaders inside the organization to own the purpose as much as you do in your leadership capacity. And that's all equally true of the cross-functional teams. And I say that because I constantly hear from leaders inside organizations they're struggling because their employees are saying to them, "Hey, what have you done for us lately?" Or they will, for \$5,000 more, they might go to another job. But what they're failing to realize is that when you charge everyone inside the organization with the responsibility of maintaining and elevating that purpose, everyone buys in. Because it's a shared responsibility. And the other thing you said was to make sure that it's proactive. I mean you are generating it and being accountable internally. You're not waiting for a consumer to call something out and then go, "Oh no, no, no, no. We really do mean what we say." Is there anything else you'd add to that? Is there any [inaudible 00:21:57]-

Speaker 3:

Yeah, and I think the one thing that we've actually started to use this language a lot now as a community, is that every job is a climate job. Every job is a sustainability job within our company. And it doesn't just sit on the shoulders of the sustainability manager or the advocacy manager or our team impact officer. They are our North Star, they're guiding us, but it's our responsibility as an organization to deliver on our commitments. And I think by really empowering everyone to be a part of delivering this, it helps every functional responsibility see themselves in driving the change and seize the impacts, rather than it sitting with the standalone part of the organization.

So that's a big thing that I would recommend for folks if they're like really think, "How do I organize for impact?" Every single person in the company needs to sign up to say, "I'm here to deliver these goals," which are beyond just the top line and the bottom line.

Speaker 2:

I love that. I mean, purpose has to be pervasive throughout the organization. Only then do you unlock the value of it to your business. And you mentioned a couple of terms in there that I want to sort of ask about. At one point you mentioned consciousness being this sort of area that is focused on sustainability and more, but then you also talked about climate there. And I noticed that the new version of your annual corporate consciousness update is now called Climate Fingerprints Report and Framework. Now this space is changing and there's a lot of people paying attention, and climate and carbon at top of mine. Help us understand that shift and why it happened.

Speaker 3:

So if I could talk about one of the top three things that I'm the most proud about this year, it would be what we've been able to do with what would traditionally be thought of as CSR reporting. But I'll start a little bit of the way back in the time machine. So Seventh Generation was one of the first companies to introduce this idea of transparency reporting. So I think around 2004... Our records are always a little bit-

Speaker 2:

That was way early, this was a very unpopular conversation back then.

Speaker 3:

That's right. It was like, "How do you really lead transparently?" Well you tell people your goal and then you tell people what you're doing about them and where you've fallen short. And that just has become how we operate. So every year we've published how reportings on how we've been able to deliver against our climate goals and the areas that we've fallen short. And as we turn the quarter into this year, I think again to our corporate consciousness team who really is our North Star for how we think about where we need to take this work, I think the question they ask themselves is, "This space is ripe for disruption, where can we go next?"

And so this idea of fingerprints emerged from the work, which I'll try my best to explain this as simply as possible, but obviously we all know about our carbon footprint, which really talks about what we are responsible for. So in the case of our business, we talk about the carbon footprint of our company, of our products. Now carbon fingerprints is where you start to look about where your investments are. So really tracing everything that you touch, is how I would talk about it, and how invested that is in fossil fuel. So a couple of a great examples of this is looking at where you're investing in marketing or services. And so who are those companies working with? Who are their clients? What choices are they making? What goals are they setting? Another one is the area of banking, so where is your 401k invested, as another great example.

And so this really just completely expands the idea of taking responsibility for your own impact, and really goes beyond just the product footprint that we have today but really making sure that we're thinking of now the entire ecosystem, which is everything that you touch. And honestly I'll tell you, so when the team brought the idea to me I was like, "Guys, I'm scared. I don't know. What's going to come back from this? I'm not sure I'm ready for this." And six months later as we started to publish it I was like, "Thank goodness that we did this work," because it's groundbreaking in my opinion.

Speaker 2:

It is groundbreaking and it's such an expansion of the best practices out there in the sense that we're all thinking about multi-stakeholder, participatory sort of capitalism today and really serving everybody's future. But what you're talking about is looking at not just the stakeholders in your own ecosystem, but the partners of everyone within that ecosystem. And that just takes to a whole other level. And you talk about in the report about a framework. Is the framework something specific to you or is it a larger framing for this whole sort of approach?

Speaker 3:

It's a larger framing for the whole approach. And in fact our primary goal is to really help other businesses adopt this framework. And so as we turn the corner in this work, a big piece of our



programming for next year will be meeting with other partners. Is there a coalition of businesses out there that want to adopt this framework with us? That way we have more voices, more impact, more proof points that this type of model could work. And that becomes one of our biggest initiatives, it's really influencing folks around us.

Speaker 2:

And I'm going to put on my cynics hat for a moment and say, "Okay, I'm going to go above and beyond in terms of my purpose and enlist others and really sort of scale our impact." How does it deliver value to the business? Because it takes time, it takes attention, it takes resources. It does double down on your integrity, but I think a lot of young purposeful companies, they're like, "We're still trying to stay in business at the same time." So where do you see that value flow back to the business?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, right. So I get this question a lot and I even asked the question like, "What's the ROI on this?" Right? As a business leader. And so I think two things. One, I believe this is about reputation and about building trust in leadership. And I can't even tell you how far that goes for us, the doors that are open for conversations when we need them, because of the time that we've invested just in changing the systems around us. And I also believe a lot of this stuff can and shouldn't be measured. It's just what we do. We are in service of driving this change. Right now as a company we are in service of stopping the climate emergency. And this is a big piece of where we can help do that. So in many ways this is just a part of our company delivering the strategy that we feel like will have the most impact right now.

Speaker 2:

It's really well put. I mean if we all really thought about ourselves as being of service to the planet and others that make our lives possible, it can look very similar the way that what a business does, it makes products and markets and so on. But that come from makes all the difference. And we just need to reframe our mindset. And Seventh Generation has also built a standalone brand that is one of the top purpose companies out there, but you've also recently been acquired by Unilever. And Unilever in its own right has been one of, if not the leading global enterprise out there for sustainability. But they've had leadership transitions in their own right, and there's a lot of dynamics that go on between one of the portfolio companies and an enterprise. Both sort of top down and bottom up and in between and so on. How does that sort of new operating dynamic affect the purpose of the company? Or do you carve out in the first place what you want to protect in terms of how you run your own business? What does that look like?

Speaker 3:

The good news for us at Seventh Generation, as one of the key brands within the Unilever portfolio, is that we've really been able to provide a level of influence and expertise, which has been really beneficial for the Unilever ecosystem. So when we were acquired, I think we were really able to hit the ground and help with cracking things like post-consumer recycled material and plant-based ingredients. And so that for us, that's the magic when we're able to help influence and scale the larger systems based on what we believe to be the best materials to use for the world around us. And so I think that is a very positive relationship that we have out of the gates.

And in terms of your second question around how do we really navigate leadership transitions, it's really in how you talk to and onboard people in what you do. Anytime that we're talking with new leaders or get questions about our business, it's really about unpacking what is the unique business model that we

run and really what is the impact that we're trying to drive. So a lot of my time is spent really helping people understand the nuance in how we work. So how we make decisions, how we operate cross-functionally, the support systems that we need in order to drive maximum impact just becomes part of how I introduce someone and welcome them into the partnership between Unilever and Seven Gen.

Speaker 2:

So you also take a much sort of broader approach to social equity in terms of not only the planet that we share but there's a lot of issues that you speak to that I think are not top of mind when you think about environmental issues. I know that quality childcare is something that you're very, very committed to. How does that show up and how do you sort of [inaudible 00:31:07] rank the various issues that you can speak to? Because there's no end of issues out there, how do you decide where you focus your attention?

Speaker 3:

We actually used that model this year. So as I started the conversation, our vision is pretty big. So we're about transforming the health and safety of the security for generations to come, which can be quite a large mission statement. And one of the things when the company was first formed that our founder Jeffrey Hollender used to ask is, "Where can Seventh Generation have the most impact in the world right now?" And it's a great way of just re centering focus. And so we asked ourselves that question coming into this year. He said, "Okay, world around us is changing. We're emerging from," at least on our side, "a very volatile business environment. Where can we have the most impact?" And as we went through that exercise as a team, where we arrived was undoubtedly climate action is where we could have the most impact. And so it became very clear to us as we asked ourselves that question where our focus needed to be.

So that's where we spend most of our time. It's where we spend most of our dollars, it's where we line up our partners. But that doesn't mean that the next issue rolls around that isn't related to climate but we believe in it, of course we're going to put our stamp on it and support it. And so we really take these things one at a time. But it's important to know what's at the center of your strategy versus what's just the right thing to do for better business, dependent on the needs.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, it's an interesting time for brands as we all show up, well purposely I think what I observed out there is this table stakes in and around fair and living wage, sustainability and DNI. But above and beyond that, those issues that are authentic and relevant to your brand are what you should speak to. But as you say, if there's an issue that flares up, for example the war in Ukraine, that's simply the right thing to do and you need to show up. Can you help us understand the process for how you decide on those issues in real time, especially when you've been around for 30 plus years, you know who you are so clearly, what's that process look like when you go, "Hey, we need to do something here."

Speaker 3:

It's so nuanced. So if I could give advice to folks who are trying to form this, I would say it's about having a process, but it's also about fluidity and listening and trust as leaders. And so for us, obviously we know what we stand for and that's really clear. But if an issue rolls in and someone's asking us to sign on and support, what we'll usually do is pull together a key group of stakeholders within our organization< so a smaller subset of our leadership team, and say, "Okay guys, let's talk this through. What are our partners saying? Do we have a perspective? Do we need more facts?" It's usually an exploratory phase as

something comes to the table. And then each person will come with a point of view, wearing either a marketing hat, a sustainability hat, an advocacy hat, partner hat, say here's a PR hat, to say, "Here's what we think."

And then we'll usually kind of go back and forth as a team, look at it from all angles. So what's the advantage of moving forward with this? What could be some of the downstream impacts? What if this goes wrong? I think we spent a lot of time on readiness of the company to make sure that we're prepared, and then we'll keep moving forward. But I think this work happens fast. So you have to know the key people to call when you need to make a decision, but then you really need to hold each other and say, "How do we slow down and really think this through to make sure that we don't unintentionally miss something in the explore process that could put us on really just not having the impact that we desired from the outset."

Speaker 2:

Yeah, you've seen some companies react with the best of intentions that expose themselves to risks that they probably couldn't have foreseen, and it's part of the nature of the business landscape now. How do you also, when you go to commit to an issue, one of the challenges purposeful companies find is do you lead the charge yourself? For example, if you're advocating for policy change, or do you leverage your resources to support organizations that are already doing the work? Or is it both?

Speaker 3:

So it's usually both. And how we would get to that decision is one, understanding where we are investing our time and where we have deep partnerships. So this is where this comes down to true authenticity. So if it's an issue, I'll just give the example related to climate then we've had deep partnerships, we have communications, we have the authority to be able to lead. But if it's an issue that might be outside of something core to us, it would be more authentic for us to support, mostly because we haven't invested in the partner work to really be able to get behind this credibly. And so I think that becomes something very important to take into consideration is have you invested the time, the education, the dollars and partners who will be able to stand with you in these issues rather than you as a company really standing alone?

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I mean it sounds so sort of common sense and human. At the same time it's so sort of urgent and pressing and there's so much rigor that business brings to it. How have you found is the most effective way to navigate the business landscape when you're now part of obviously a publicly traded company and so on? And there are those on either side of any issues and there are those who are only looking at short-term returns and there are those who are looking at our long-term survival. How do you calibrate those various voices as you make those decisions?

Speaker 3:

You know-

Speaker 2:

I think that laugh answers at all.

Speaker 3:

I think I've come to grips with the fact that I will never make anybody happy, and I am in service of this company and this company's mission. And so I think as I certainly stepped into this job and really had to take some test drives in this, it became very evident to me that for everything we do there's always someone who could have a different point of view or might not agree with it. But if I believe that this is in service of our company, then I know that we're doing the right thing. And so I think knowing that you can't be a pleaser if you're trying to do issues work, I think is a big piece of this. And I've also just learned to keep my stakeholders close. And so I've really had to learn how to communicate, people who don't like surprises. I do my absolute best to keep people posted on how are approaching this work. That way people can feel comfortable and not surprised, and so you can come back to them in the bigger ecosystem of news or whatnot.

Speaker 2:

So I want to ask you how to solve for the two words that keep me up at night. And they are speed and scale. Because I'm concerned that the timelines we're working against are contracting towards us. They're not just sitting out in the future waiting for us to arrive. And in as much as that we can provide the products, the better choices that consumers can make and industries can level up what they're doing, this luxury, this presumption that we have the luxury of choice as to how far and how fast we change isn't going to get the job done. So how does a Seventh Generation think about speed and scale? Because so many people look to the brand. How do you challenge yourself?

Speaker 3:

I mean, I'm in the game of speed and I am in the game of looking for speed and scale. And those are going to be the two biggest things when I think about my business model that are the unlock for us to really mainstream our business model. And how I do that, so how I navigate that in our day-to-day, is the data, is the proof points. So I talk a lot about how these things work. How they work for business, how they work for our consumers. I talk a lot about how this is good for business and we're seeing positive returns. And so it really then helps enable other companies... Take Unilever as a great example, how do I convince them to scale different ingredients? I show them that it works, I show them that it helps drive great business returns. And I think at the end of the day, that becomes the best language to use in a lot of this is just showing people that it's good for business.

Speaker 2:

Right. I mean you got to sort of speak or speak to what people are willing to listen to, which is the business case. And I know that none of this is going to be as effective as we want unless we really do get governor on board with business and we get the policy moving in the right direction. Is there anything over the decade, more than decade that you've had at Seven Gen and all the learnings internally that you've found has been particularly effective? Because almost in every industry and through the lens of every product, we have to change the way things are being done to enable these solutions to sort of compound and thrive. Any guidance on how to twist those rubber arms in the government sector?

Speaker 3:

So what I can speak to is an attribute that I have really observed over time, is you just can't give up. And so this is about the long game. It's about the persistent long game in what you believe in and continuing to put the same issues on the docket, the same priorities in place, and the wins will come. And so I think if you're truly trying to drive change, if you're a business especially that's looking for broader influence, I would say don't quit because it doesn't work in the first couple of months. It's a yearly commitment to

the change that you're trying to drive that I believe gives you the absolute best chance of trying to make progress.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I really like that. It's just a recommitment over and over again. So given the year that we've just had, 2022, which was sobering in so many ways, what would you say the biggest challenges for you right now? And how are you thinking about solving for it? What could we learn from there?

Speaker 3:

Yeah, so I mean the economy, right? I run a business, so I'm going to be able to show that this business works in order for us to continue to do the good that we do in the world. And I think one of the biggest challenges that we've been facing is just super volatile cost that have been impacting our business as well as reverberating supply chain challenges post-COVID. I think many businesses, we haven't been immune to a lot of the fluctuating cost structures for ROT and pack, as a great example. And how do we continue to navigate that has been top of mind for us.

And so I think one of the things that it has allowed us to do is really get sharp on what is the most important pieces of what we need to stick to from our business model and what are things that don't serve us anymore? As a leadership team, it's been great to actually sit around the table and really look at the things that we invest in to say, "Are they in service of this company or are they an accessory that doesn't add value to the impact that we're driving?" Because now is the time to really make sure that you know exactly what you're putting your dollars behind.

Speaker 2:

And I want to sort of close with that issue of leadership, as a company that's been out front 35 years and is now at the forefront of probably the most pressing issue of our time, how would you characterize the shift in leadership? What do you think leadership needs to look like moving forward?

Speaker 3:

Oh goodness. Well, what I would say is that this is super hard work. Climate work is exhausting and I think our partners know that. So you have to be resilient. You have to be able to continue to focus on what you are trying to change and know that it's not going to come easy. And so if you're looking for quick wins and leadership sees like, "My job isn't yours," but I know that the change that I'm driving is going to benefit generations to come. And so I think that's really being clear on what you're trying to accomplish also becomes super duper important.

Speaker 2:

And I just have to say, Alison, thank you so much for the leadership at Seventh Generation, but also the way that you are elevating the leadership. Because it's those examples that give everyone out there that's trying to make a difference the passion and the heart and the confidence to keep going. So thank you so much for the insights today and for everything that Seventh Generation has done.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

Speaker 2:

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