

Simon Mainwaring:

How we work could not be more important to the success of our companies and more than ever, with the rising return to the office, the work environment is being re-imagined to that end. So how can we redesign the spaces we work in to foster productivity, community and growth? How can we do that in a way that's more responsible to our planet that's suffering under the impact of the climate emergency? Solving for these two issues hand in hand is critical to the future of work and also to how work can better our future. Let's dive in.

From We First and Goal 17 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. Today I'm joined by Kim Dabbs, Global Vice President of ESG and social innovation at Steelcase, a global design and thought leader manufacturing innovative furnishings and solutions to help people do their best work in the many places where work happens. We'll discuss how we can all reimagine what and how we make to better serve the people in our companies and the planet we share, and how to join and accelerate a transformative movement that's turning business into a force for good that will fix our future. Kim, welcome to Lead with We.

Kim Dabbs:

Thank you so much for having me here.

Simon Mainwaring:

Now Kim, you are the global VP of ESG and social innovation at Steelcase and I think lots of people know Steelcase. They've come across it in their work lives through various sort of avenues, but for those who don't know, give us a sense of what Steelcase does and just what a leader in the industry it is.

Kim Dabbs:

Thank you so much. Steelcase, we're over 100 years old and we really shape and design experiences for how they spend their time and their days at work and in the world. So much of what we do is around presenting and creating and designing unique work experiences and the furnishings that make up people's every day. Really at our core we're really trying to help the world work better.

Simon Mainwaring:

If you come across a Steelcase product, there's lots of brands under the umbrella of the company. Can you point to some of the brands that people might recognize?

Kim Dabbs:

I mean, our main brand is our Steelcase brand, and that's probably so many people throughout the world. Millions of people every day work in Steelcase environments and don't always know that they're working in our environment. But a lot of the other brands that we have are brands like Orange Box and Viccarbe and many others throughout the world, both in the work setting as well as in healthcare and education, so partners like Smith Systems and others.

Simon Mainwaring:

I've been in the sustainability space for some time and I've known about Steelcase's leadership. I think for some folks out there they might not know that you've been leaning into sustainability for so long.

Give us a sense of why that came about. I mean, why was it so important to the company well before others are joining this sort of dialogue?

Kim Dabbs:

A great question. I think part of the reason that this is who we are and what we've always done is it's just been the legacy that we've had through generations, both from the founding families and our commitments to people and to sustainable design, as well as over time really leaning into that innovation side and understanding all innovation is rooted in service of people and the planet.

Simon Mainwaring:

That's an interesting thing you say, that innovation being rooted or driven by service to the planet that obviously is our shared home is an idea that has such currency today, but it didn't for a long time. Sometimes folks would innovate just to produce more at lower costs, hopefully with better functional benefits. When did you see that shift? When did you see industries wake up to the fact that, "Hey, our ultimate responsibility is to the planet that makes all these products possible? When did they happen for you?

Kim Dabbs:

Well, I think as I said before, and I know a lot of companies do say this, but it's really how we've always operated. When we think about that innovation process, as we think about these movements that happen, you go from being business as usual of really having these as considerations and rooting in them, but then you start to see the movement build. Because of our scale and because of our size, being a leader in this world of work and in the built environment, when we make choices, the industry also makes choices. That's a responsibility I think that we take seriously and we work hard to make sure that we're taking a leadership position in a lot of these policies and practices to make sure that we're doing good for the world, but that everyone is.

Simon Mainwaring:

Your title is VP of ESG and social innovation, and there's a lot of terminology out there. It's acronym sort of Whack-a-Mole out there in the sustainability space. Help people understand what ESG is and perhaps why it's different to sustainability, but also how is the social innovation piece different? How is that carved out?

Kim Dabbs:

Titles are so funny and department names are so funny. I always think if I were to explain my title to my mom, I still don't know if she'd know what I do.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right?

Kim Dabbs:

Because there are so many letters and so many terms, and obviously they mean different things to different people. At the end of the day, I think of ESG and social innovation as really how we deliver on our values that we've committed to as a company in the world. When I say in the world, it's not just to our employees, it's our employees and our dealers and our suppliers and the communities where we

live and work. That's the social innovation extension of that title of ESG, and then social innovation because all innovation is social, all innovation impacts people and because of that, all of this needs to be woven together.

Simon Mainwaring:

Can't help but think of the big drive to get people back to work now around the world. You're seeing companies mandated, especially here in the United States. Europe and APAC Asia have been sort of more back to work for some time. Is it a reset moment in terms of sustainability out there? I mean, this is a sort of reboot where we get to think the whole work experience, rethink it in new ways, but also it's an opportunity to be more responsible and sustainable. Are you seeing any of that?

Kim Dabbs:

I think we're at a time where what was traditionally known as sustainability, when we think about that environmental sustainability,, is now not only at its tipping point, it's mainstream. This isn't just a nice to have, this is a have to have, this is just part of doing business. I think because of that, all of these things weaving together, the role of the office, the role of work, I think we've all seen moments of disconnection, of loneliness, of people kind of going away from each other, and then we've experienced moments of community, whether that be in the home, in the work. To us, I think when we think about people doing their best work, we really need to rethink how places and spaces enable people to do their best work. Over time, and we talked a little bit about both sustainability, governance and social innovation or the community side, when I think about going back to work, I always think of that as a choice and choice also is a privilege.

Who isn't included and involved in that ability to be able to work from home? Where are the equity issues that are baked in to all of those experiences? To me, when people come together as part of a team or come together as a company, being together in a space that they all share is a really beautiful moment.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's a really powerful point you made there that we do have a choice or we've had a choice for some time and we get the privilege or opportunity to come together and work together and get all the benefits of the workspace. I think for a long time it was almost misperceived as punitive or an obligation, but here now we've had the contrast and actually we cast it in a new light. Then as you look at your ESG strategy ... I mean, it's hard to be all things to all people and you see companies carving out different pillars or themes for their impact work. What are those themes or what are the pillars at Steelcase?

Kim Dabbs:

We really take a look at this work really encompassing our impact around people in the planet. As we talked about, as leaders in the world of work, we do help create places that impact the experience of millions of people every day and we take that responsibility seriously and because that when we think about that people pillar, we think better is possible, but what does better mean? For us on that people side better is really creating a sense of community, making sure people feel that they can belong in a place and space and a community, and especially through the lens of work, making sure that when you come to work that individuals can feel seen, heard and valued in their daily experiences.

That to me is the people side and on the planet side, we are designers and makers. That's who we are at Steelcase. By being designers and makers, we also understand that has an impact not just on people but

on the planet. Our responsibility there is one to do better for the world, and this world is one that we share. We take this seriously and we take critical science-based approaches across our entire ecosystem to ensure that we're reducing our role in climate change and really look not just at sustainability, but looking at resilience into the future.

Simon Mainwaring:

That science-based targets, that accountability, why is that so important? Because there's a bit of a wild west for a while where people were making claims, but they didn't have to really lock it down and so on. How does that change what you do and how does it give us, whether we're customers or just folks out there, more confidence that real change is happening?

Kim Dabbs:

Well, I think with so much of this and everyone's talking about exactly what you said, a disparate field, people talking about different things, different ways, to us the science-based targets were critical because not only are we setting those targets, but we're getting validation and not just any validation but scientific validation through the science-based targets initiative. In order to build trust and transparency into that process of our commitment to reduce our carbon footprint and to make progress and share that progress in a way that's shared and understood, to us that was critical.

Simon Mainwaring:

Then for those of us who don't geek out on upstream materiality and material sourcing and all that sort of stuff, give us a sense of some of those metrics or targets or the data that you collect that then go into the products you make so we get a sense of what those targets mean

Kim Dabbs:

In order to do this in a way that is meaningful and holistic, we really had to think thoroughly throughout our entire system, our entire organization. When we're setting one of the industry's most aggressive goals to cut emissions, our own emissions, by 50% by 2030, that scientific validation was critical. That happens through things like carbon-neutral certified products that we put out in the market, but it also includes who we choose to partner with throughout the world, so meaning our supply chain. You may hear things like Scope 3. To us, suppliers are Scope 3, and this is how the industry defines it. Not only are we setting our own goals, but we're also working with our suppliers to help them set their goals as well because we know that this is a daisy chain of impact, not only what we make, but who we choose to partner with and their impact in the world.

We're taking a holistic way, not only how we design and think about products, the materials that we choose and use, making sure that we're designing our products in a way that can be reused, recycled, but we're also making sure that when we're manufacturing products, that it's done throughout our entire value stream.

Simon Mainwaring:

When you put all these different elements together, it seems like there's a big shift. As you said, it's gone mainstream. I know that I was doing some reading and you mentioned that we're on the cusp of a purpose revolution. Give us a sense of what you mean by that and how it's playing out in a way that maybe gives you confidence that we're going to sort of turn things around.

Kim Dabbs:

I do. I think about these moments like the industrial revolution, the technological revolution that we're all living through, but I feel like we're at a moment where purpose is the thing both for brands, for companies, for individuals, everyone is searching and looking to make sure that they have purpose and they're serving a holistic good. Because of that and because of this critical mass of people really longing for and searching for that, we're getting shifts not only in the industry and in our sector, but this is why there's so much debate. This is why this topic is top of mind because people want to be a part of this conversation. How everyone gets there is always going to be debated. What language should we use? Is it this acronym or that acronym?

In the end, if it's rooted towards that north star of making sure that we're committed to building community and making sure that we're committed to this planet that we share, I think there is a great opportunity to unite in that purpose and create coalitions and communities around people that are trying to make a difference. Because in this space, in this people and planet space, this is not a moment to be competitive. This is a moment to be collaborative, to take a learning stance, to understand what other people are doing and bring others along with you, and that's the moment that excites me.

Simon Mainwaring:

I love that. This is not a moment to be competitive. I mean, there is no winner here. The impact of the climate emergency is clear all around us and whether it's all the extreme weather that you see around the world and so on. For those not in the manufacturing built environment, are there new techniques? Are there new manufacturing processes that you've embraced that help you reach that carbon neutrality or carbon negative goals on a tangible practical level in terms of how you make things or how you source things? So there are a couple of examples you might give?

Kim Dabbs:

Yeah, I mean we could get really technical.

Simon Mainwaring:

We could get really geeky right here.

Kim Dabbs:

I mean, everything ... people are familiar with solar panels, but we've also put in combined heat and power programs that actually reduce our emissions. We've done things like our sustainable design framework to make sure that we're thinking about embodied carbon, thinking about the weight of product, thinking about the choices that we make every single day at every single gate in that PDNL process. Because we're doing things like that all the way from the actual operations and manufacturing into the front end of the ideas and inspiration, we're not taking a transactional approach. It's one that's going to be transformational, and that's what we're hoping for.

Simon Mainwaring:

As everyone moves back to work, and it does seem ... I saw some data actually that suggests that the vast majority of US office workers will be back in the office within the next year, which surprised me, but it seems like it's building momentum. Is this an opportunity to come back more sustainably as I was talking before, or how are you redesigning the work environment? I think of the days of the gig economy and Google back in the day, and you've got these endless rows of desks and then you've got the shared

workspace and so on. Is this a new moment? Are you rethinking about built environments in new ways? If so, give us a sense of what that looks like after COVID and remote work and so on.

Kim Dabbs:

I think we always are. We go to sleep thinking about new ways of working, and we wake up and we test and prototype and try it out on ourselves and partner with organizations that help us think through these ideas. Right now, what's top of mind for me is really as we come back together, as we come back together as a community, both in the workplace and in the world, how do we design for inclusion? When you're rethinking how people are coming back to the office, this is a beautiful moment to really think how can we make sure that the workplace that they're coming back to you is as inclusive as possible and space shapes behavior and that behavior over time actually becomes that work culture.

What are the things that you're really leaning into that you want to have as those beliefs of an organization, and how can space make sure that everyone's included, that people are seen, that people are heard, and through their work and through the ways that they can show up in the world, how are they valued? The workplace could play a big role in that and how you design your environments.

Simon Mainwaring:

I have to ask, I think about this and I can't imagine ... Steelcase, you've got your offices in New York, I've been there. Is there one thing that you do special there that you don't see anywhere else that might be almost like a pilot or a secret as to how you are controlling the built spaces or designing them? Is there something unique there you might share?

Kim Dabbs:

Well, I think there's a unique piece in each of our locations, and this is why I love visiting at our different locations throughout the world. So many new ideas are being seeded and tried in every location. I mean, even in our location. In Michigan, I remember we were rethinking the role of leadership spaces and close your eyes and just imagine you're walking into a big company and where would you expect leaders to sit? You're in a high rise, maybe you have to take the elevator to the 25th floor and it's behind two layers of security. We were trying to think if you want a culture of innovation, if you want to really seed trust and transparency, we know that trust is built not through a meeting once a year. It's built by those everyday interactions that happen when you actually work together. Those conversations when you're in the coffee line, those conversations when you pass someone and ask them how their day is doing.

We had shifted our leadership spaces and we put them at the middle of our learning space at Steelcase and our innovation space, so everyone walks in between those areas. They're on the main floor, they're in a very open space and what that did is it shifted the relationships that leaders had with teams because we knew we wanted to build that trust. When you start thinking about the role that space has, those types of shifts within your culture, it's like we want an innovation culture, we want leaders to be present, but we really want them to build those authentic relationships. It was really beautiful to see and know and understand those conversations that happen over time. Sometimes I talk to our employees, they're like, "I just talked to the CEO when I was having lunch", or "I was just in the elevator with our CFO." It's just those little nudges towards humanizing behavior to make sure that everyone in the organization has both availability and access to build relationships throughout the organization.

Simon Mainwaring:

That makes so much sense and I trust that everyone listening to this podcast will go back to their office and drag the CEO's desk into the middle of the large open common area so there's nothing but traffic on all sides. It's so important what you're saying because all of us, especially after the hybrid remote workers [inaudible 00:19:52], the resilience of our culture, the trust, the relationships you build within the organization are so important. If you can really look at the built environment, the used space to bring people together and create those connections, it can really affect how you show up as a company and therefore how much success you have and so on. Sometimes I don't think a lot of us pause to think about that, but it is so determinative.

You also talk about community engagement and the commitment at Steelcase to that end and in a larger sense to the SDGs, the sustainable development goals, how do you reach out to communities and how does that ladder up to the SDGs?

Kim Dabbs:

When we think about community at Steelcase, we have so many different locations throughout the world, and part of the social innovation piece was really rethinking the role of business with community. At the end of the day, we are part of community. What we do impacts community and community is who we are and in our core. When we think about how companies can start to engage, it can't be transactional. I know I keep coming back to trust, but trust is built with community at the local level. It's not me dropping into a community telling a community what they need. It's the employees that live there, our team members actually working with organizations that have a shared and common interest and understanding that we as employees, as individuals are learning just as much from community organizations as they're learning from us in that partnership. When you start to build with community instead of for community, it changes everything because people are what's going to shape the policies and practices of companies throughout the world.

Simon Mainwaring:

Is there an example that stands out to you in terms of that lived experience that you saw that transformative effect?

Kim Dabbs:

There are so many different partnerships, and I always go back to one that has my heart and it's the West Michigan Center for Arts and Technology in Michigan. This organization has just been phenomenal. They focus on creating equitable access to opportunity for community to thrive, and they do that through teen arts and tech engagement as well as adult career training. Steelcase has been a partner with them since their inception, I think 10, 15 years ago now. Part of that was learning what role does Steelcase have, what do we know about that community in a way that's meaningful? We know space, so we helped really the organization rethink what a new student experience could be.

As they were thinking through business models and service, they were thinking, "How can we rethink the role of education?" We brought in some of the best thinkers in the world and we brought together our social capital that we could leverage as a global organization to say, "I know a researcher from MIT that does this. I know the D school at Stanford over here", and we're going to bring all of those people together in service of the question that you're trying to solve and making that space and co-creating an understanding what that new model could be has shifted and changed the organization all the way through rethinking education, rethinking credentialing, understanding what equitable access to opportunity and career pathways are all the way through to the moment they were recognized by the Obama administration as one of the top programs in the entire country. They're shifting policy. They're

shifting the way people think about the role of education through a lens that honors each and every individual that walks through their door. That's the kind of partnership that we love.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's such an interesting cascading effect in terms of modeling new behaviors and ways of thinking for an entire industry, and the recognition shows that. I want to ask a provocative question, which is most companies out there, B2B or B2C, are setting different targets for carbon neutrality or being carbon negative and so on. I know Steelcase is really ahead of the pack in the sense that you're aiming for carbon negative in 2030. There are a lot of companies that still talk about 2040, 2050 and so on, and some of them are trying to walk in those goals because there's more regulatory pressure and so on. What are your thoughts in and around this? Because we don't have time to waste and we have the technology to rethink how we make things. It's just whether we have the will to get it done. When do you think those ambitions should be? How soon?

Kim Dabbs:

As soon as possible. I think anyone in my position would say as soon as possible. At the same time, I think there's, as you know, much debate about setting goals, about measuring progress, about mandates. At the same time, we have things like CSRD here in the EU, which is kind of a mandate that already exists. I think any business that does work at a global scale, it's not if, it's when, and we know the when is only going to accelerate, and we're hoping everyone's working and pushing towards technological advances and everyone's working towards their goals, but the only way we're all going to get there farther and faster is when we come together collectively as a community, not only to make the commitments, but to share our learnings along the way.

Simon Mainwaring:

That's absolutely true. We move further faster together. CSRD, this is this new regulation that's coming in the US and the European Union, which is really putting enormous pressure on companies to transform what they're doing. I have to ask, I mean, when you talk to different folks at different companies, there's a real burden or onus on companies to show up differently when you've got all these different KPIs by which they've got to measure their progress and so on. When someone says, "Wow, I'd love to do that, but it's such a burden and it's taking up so much time to comply with the regulations and measure and create the data around everything", but how do you throttle between those two? How do you sort of think your way through when you're already trying to keep your business going? There's a lot of economic headwinds, now you've got this increased regulatory burden.

Kim Dabbs:

I think this is a short-term versus long-term understanding in any system is hard to get going in the beginning. I imagine at the turn of the century, years and years ago, the financial regulations were difficult for companies to get on board with to get standardization. We're at a new turn of the century where this is it and it's going to take effort. I don't think the industry is completely standardized yet, which feels like every time you open up the news, something's changed day to day or week to week. But if you had that foundation, if you have those commitments, regulations, the compliance, the disclosures, the field is working incredibly hard to get those as closely aligned as possible to make this an easier lift for people. I think at the end of the day, those that choose not to take this road aren't going to have a choice in a decade or two.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think it's costing us things that are far more valuable than the pennies or money that they think they might be saving. It's going to cost us our future in so many different ways. I mean, what caution or what counsel, shall we say, would you give those companies that are still sitting on their hands thinking anything from one extreme, "The climate emergency isn't real" all the way through to "I'll wait till I'm absolutely forced to do it", or "I'll do the least lift now, I'll just do industry compliance" rather than try and get ahead of it? Any advice or reflection you might give them?

Kim Dabbs:

Well, I think there's one thing, the choice making that you're talking about at the strategy level, and there's choice making at the people level. I keep coming back to that people side of things. At the end of the day, I mean, the research shows the things that people care about most right now as they're entering the workforce, as they're making decisions, it's the wellbeing of employees, it's climate, it's equity and inclusion. These are the things that are keeping people awake at night. These are the things that employees are making their choices about as they join companies. When we think about that next generation that's coming in that's going to scaffold all of these movements and that push all of these initiatives forward, they care about those things and we care about those things. The organizations that don't have that same rooting in these types of goals are going to, I would say, really miss out on the beauty and brilliance of so many people that care about these things throughout the world to join their companies as well.

Simon Mainwaring:

Do you think they'll slide off the back? Do you think their relevance or their resonance with different audiences will be such that if you wait to be third, fourth, 10th, 100th in your industry to really start self-selecting to make these changes, do you think there's a risk that companies will fall off of that?

Kim Dabbs:

I think there's a great risk personally, but I'm also not an economist.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. No, I understand. Are you seeing on the strength of what you are doing, but also others, are you seeing your entire industry shifting? Are we reaching those moments of momentum yet where you're starting to see the built industry, the furniture industry challenge?

Kim Dabbs:

Absolutely. Every place I go, every conversation that I have, and it doesn't have to be an ESG conference or a sustainability conference, people are talking about this from the World Economic Forum all the way through to small grassroots organizations. These are the issues that people are talking about and these are the issues people care about.

Simon Mainwaring:

If you could wave a wand and solve for the biggest obstacle that you see in the way for the industry at large right now, what would that obstacle be? What's that thing that if we could just change that, then everything would change?

Kim Dabbs:

I always go back to my favorite quote, which is by Yoda, but he says, "Do or do not. There is no try." I think this one moment where everyone just needs to take action. Just even if these are moments where we have to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and if we wait for everything to be aligned, if we wait for everyone to use the right language, if we wait for everything to be in the perfect spot, it's going to be too late. It's time to just move forward and start doing things.

Simon Mainwaring:

Is there any particular innovation or way of manufacturing or supply chain solution that really excites you? What's that thing that you talk about at the kitchen table at home where you're like, "Oh my God, you won't believe this?" Is there anything you'd share?

Kim Dabbs:

I think there's a lot happening in the materials innovation space, all the way from partnerships with fabric companies that we have all the way from textiles into new materials. But I think the innovation that excites me the most is not materials or in these other things, but in the fact that designing for inclusion is taking a more and more prominent role in how people think about workplace in the future. I know we like to think about those tangible tactical things, but at the end of the day, people in culture are what weaves this all together. Those voices and those choices that we make really to embed that into our organizations needs to not only be a priority, but it needs to be a continued investment.

Simon Mainwaring:

I mentioned the big ambition of 2030 being carbon negative, which is such a emerging goal for many companies. All of us who have chosen to be in this space for a long time, as have you and I, I think we have a burning optimism inside us, a bloody mindedness where we just want to take this issue, our social environmental challenges, head on. But still, it's hard. There's headwinds. We're making some progress, but not enough. The timelines are contracting towards us and so on. What gives you optimism, Kim? What sort of fuels you to keep going? What's that spark inside you that you look to each time and go, "No, we're going to get there, and here's why."

Kim Dabbs:

I really look at this work as forever work. No matter how much progress you or I make in our lifetimes, there's always going to be more progress to be made. I think living Jane McGonigal talks about it as urgent optimism. I try to root myself in that urgent optimism every single day for me and my teams, but there are peaks and valleys, and I can tell you I get to see the best of humanity every single day in places that I visit, in how people think about new initiatives, about how people have authentic care for how they show up in community and for each other. I think the fact that when things are hard and when disaster strikes, when we see wildfires, when we see all of these things happening in the world, to see the movement and collective impact of people actually coming together for each other is the only thing that keeps me going in this work.

Simon Mainwaring:

There is a whole new class of sustainability leaders or people who work inside companies that want to transform them and so on. Any advice you'd give to them? You've mentioned things can be tough and

there are good times and bad times, but for these younger sustainability leaders coming through, any advice?

Kim Dabbs:

First, you're entering the field at such an exciting time. What a field of opportunity to be joining this movement at this time. I use the word movement so intentionally because I think this work is movement building. When I think about anyone entering the workforce in sustainability, in social impact, in all of these areas, whether it be finance, whether it be law, truly, any of these areas, everyone has the opportunity to make a difference if they can think of this as not only seeding a movement, but growing a movement and continuing the movement and those choices that we make, if you look at this work through the lens of movement building, it changes from the I to the we and then from the we to the world in a way that really can take you through those peaks and valleys throughout your life.

Simon Mainwaring:

Kim, I can't thank you enough on behalf of everyone for the leadership that Steelcase has provided for so long, because it really allows that movement to have sort of a flag that others can follow and so on, and also for the insights today and such a pleasure to connect.

Kim Dabbs:

Oh, thank you for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

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