



The Playbook

THE ACTIVIST LEADER IS NOT AN ARGUMENT FOR becoming one. “We’re not really trying to persuade people,” Jon Miller says of himself and co-author Lucy Parker. “People know they need to do this. What we show them is how.”

Published in January and subtitled *A New Mindset for Doing Business*, their book shows what it takes for corporate leaders around the world to respond to the intense societal challenges they are faced with. It untangles the many concepts that have emerged—ESG, corporate purpose, social impact, sustainability—and shows that what is really needed is a new approach to leadership.

Their 400-page book aims to be a practical guide

JON MILLER and LUCY PARKER, co-authors and co-leads of Brunswick’s Business & Society practice, talk to **KEVIN HELLIKER** about the new mindset of leadership.

through the obstacles certain to arise when leaders couple their financial goals with social goals. With the authors drawing upon their work as co-leads of the global Business & Society practice at Brunswick Group, the book is more practitioner-driven than research-driven, as they put it.

Miller and Parker, Editors in Chief of the *Brunswick Social Value Review*, spoke with *Brunswick Review* Editor Kevin Helliher.

The popular image of the activist is someone who stands in opposition to CEOs. How did you arrive at the idea of CEOs as activists?

JM: We’ve seen them doing it. Many of the leaders we’ve worked with have started to approach these difficult environmental and social issues with a spirit of activism. They may not call themselves activists. But they see something that needs to change, they

recognize the role their company can play, and they roll up their sleeves and try to make it happen. They don't leave it to somebody else.

LP: Most people currently think of activists as those who are trying to rattle the cages of corporates, to get them to change. What we're saying is, "Why wait for that? Why not rattle the cage yourself?"

The evidence and examples in your book are voluminous, leaving me with the sense that we've reached a tipping point. Have we?

LP: When you look at the scale of environmental challenges—most of all, the climate crisis and biodiversity—and on top of that the intense social pressures, such as demand for action against inequality, then the model that was purely financial looks like it's run out of road. It's the scale of the challenges that's created a tipping point for business.

JM: There is an undeniably urgent commercial imperative for businesses to seriously engage with these societal issues. It's coming at business leaders from all directions, from employees who want to know where you stand on particular issues to investors who want to see that you understand the whole new landscape of risk facing business; regulators who are responding more and more forcibly; and social stakeholders of all kinds who are intensifying the pressure that they're placing on businesses in more joined-up and sophisticated ways.

What would you say to business leaders who are daunted by the idea of "activist leadership"? Maybe they don't want to stick their neck out?

JM: It is daunting. If you're trying to make real change happen inside a business, it can feel like everything is stacked against you. The systems don't want to be disrupted. The markets just want the predictable, familiar models that they're used to. The corporate mindset just wants the status quo. And sometimes for every yes you get, there are 99 no's: "That's too hard." "That'll cost too much." "That'll take too long." "The materials don't exist."

But it is possible. It does happen. In our book you'll find leaders who've pushed past those obstacles, who found a way around them.

LP: Unless you can tap into your own conviction that this needs to happen, you will just go with the way it's gone. In the outside world, these issues have momentum, and unless you tap into that force, you'll be drawn all the time back to the historic paradigm. It's a matter of leadership. You have to be driven by the conviction that it's worth leading the business in this direction.

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You make clear up front that it won't be easy when you say, "Your most contentious areas may be your biggest chance for leadership."

LP: Where a conversation really gets thorny, where the biggest criticism is, where the greatest weakness is, that's where many companies will say: "Can't we talk about something else?"

It really is against the corporate instinct—and it is very much in the activist spirit—to go, "That thing? That's the thing that needs changing." But if you can put your finger on that pulse, if you can listen to that beat, there lies the opportunity for great leadership.

Identifying and focusing on the toughest area also provides clarity on which issues you don't need to act on. Today there is pressure for CEOs, especially in America, to speak up or jump in on a whole range of issues that weren't on their radar 10 years ago. But if you identify your greatest opportunity and you drive progress in that area, you don't have to be pulled in every direction.



JM: In the early days when Lucy and I started working together, we met a pulp and paper company in Asia that was very proudly telling us that they were opening tiger sanctuaries in Borneo.

We said, "The tigers wouldn't need saving if it wasn't for the massive amounts of deforestation that companies like you are doing." And they were like, "We can't talk about that"—but it was the real opportunity for meaningful leadership.

Leaders today can't see the world only through the lens of their business but through the lens of, "We are one part of a bigger system. How can we play our role in that system to start making progress on some of these issues?" In other words, business needs leaders who can think like activists.

When leaders really make progress on some of the most difficult challenges, it is massively energizing. People are hugely motivated by it. It unlocks innovation. It unlocks new ways of thinking. It's challenging, but it's also hugely inspiring for people.

LP: The leaders who take to it, they could talk to you forever about the challenges around deforestation or the challenges of global health systems or whatever it is. Their minds are operating across bigger questions.

If you actually lead a business in this way, you find that you're healing a divide in yourself, in your family, in your business, in the world. At no level can we afford that divide. And there are business leaders who know that.

My sense from the book is that what's needed isn't necessarily new leadership but rather a new mindset.

LP: 100%. And the adoption of the mindset can be instantaneous. It's not like you have to learn new skills and do new things before you're ready to be this new kind of leader. It is a frame of mind. It's a frame of reference as to what matters and what you're being asked to do. And then you mobilize as you would mobilize toward any other strategic priority. Once you've got the spirit to drive this, the rest is the nuts and bolts.

Some leaders will say, "We've been doing this for 20 years." And up to a point they're right. They've done as much as they can manage to do without actually disrupting the core of the business. But "incremental" doesn't crack it anymore. "On the fringe" doesn't crack it anymore. Now the question is, "Where are you prepared to be innovative, even radical? Where are you prepared to disturb the core of the business to achieve it?"

JM: We have some great stories in the book of leaders who get told by their people, "This is too hard, we can't do it." And the leaders turn around and go, "But what if we had to do it? If we had to create a commercial model for this, what would it look like? If we had to shift the system, where would we start? Because we do have to do these things."

"It's not like you have to learn new skills and do new things before you're ready to be this new kind of leader. It is a frame of mind."

What we show is that disruption can unlock innovation. When Apple hit the limits of aluminum recycling, they invented a new fully recyclable aluminum. Or there's Maersk, which ignored the received wisdom that it was just too hard to radically reduce carbon emissions associated with shipping. They started a revolution in how ships are designed and built and even recycled.

LP: If you're actually trying to stop deforestation or improve conditions for women in Bangladeshi factories, you don't stop at the bit you can control. The masters at this are always pointing at the next problem. "We've got this far, but if we're trying to actually achieve zero deforestation or living wages for women, then this is what needs to happen next."

Once you can get there, people aren't blaming you. They're looking for you to be collaboratively, authoritatively, imaginatively coming up with solutions. And suddenly you're standing in a different place in relation to the world.

Is the media too skeptical about the corporate pursuit of social value?

LP: Journalism at its best holds people accountable. That's its role, and that's incredibly important. But sometimes a journalistic position cannot imagine a company genuinely trying to do this.

For a lot of people gearing up to take this on, one of the things they find daunting is, no matter what they do, no matter what evidence, what answers, what contributions they bring to bear, there's an entrenched skepticism of their motives.

As a leader, you know that the skeptics aren't going to meet you halfway. The best you can do is have conviction on the need, have conviction that you alone can't solve it. You can contribute to it authentically and demonstrate how you're doing it.

JM: There's a difference between skepticism and cynicism. Unflinching scrutiny of corporate behavior can only ever be a good thing—and many of the companies we've worked with would say the same thing. But cynicism isn't helpful. Because we all need these businesses to be engaged in these issues.

When Lucy and I started addressing this subject, it was on the margins. Now it's a major agenda item at Davos, with The Business Roundtable—it's gone mainstream. That's going to provoke a backlash, but the backlash isn't the final chapter. Any activist who starts to make progress comes to see the wisdom of that saying, "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." ♦

KEVIN HELLIKER, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is Editor of the *Brunswick Review*.

HOW TO THINK LIKE AN ACTIVIST

- 1 • • • • • **FOCUS:** be clear what matters and why
- 2 • • • • • **PERSPECTIVE:** see it as the world sees it
- 3 • • • • • **PIVOT:** adopt the activist mindset
- 4 • • • • • **AMBITION:** aim to make a real impact
- 5 • • • • • **DISRUPTION:** do something different
- 6 • • • • • **CORE:** take action in the business
- 7 • • • • • **SYSTEM:** drive for systemwide change
- 8 • • • • • **ADVOCACY:** find your voice on the issue
- 9 • • • • • **MOMENTUM:** get going, keep going