

Don't quit your day job: URBN's Julie Verdugo on changing business from within

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To effect social change, you don't have to leave the corporate world and work for an NGO. As Julie Verdugo discovered, sometimes the biggest changes come from within.



Many of us want to be a force for good in the world but don't know how or where to start. There's a tendency to assume we're too small to make a difference, particularly when working in large multinational corporations. Yet Julie Verdugo feels it is precisely there, in companies with real scale and chance for impact, that we *can* be the change we want to see.

For Verdugo, a Chilean-American, the idea that she would have to work harder to stand out was ingrained in her from choosing to earn her undergraduate degree in industrial engineering, a male-dominated field. But it wasn't until early jobs took her to factory towns in South America and Asia that her eyes were truly opened to what overcoming obstacles meant. Encountering factory workers — often migrant women of color, some with disabilities

— made her appreciate that "I was actually the most likely to succeed in life." It was a crash course in understanding on-the-ground realities that allowed some to flourish and held others back. And it set Verdugo on a career path spent trying to reconcile the conflicts between social activism — advocating for sustainable transformation, promoting equality and inclusion of marginalized communities — and pursuing a professional career in the corporate world.

School of hard knocks

While doing her MBA at IESE, Verdugo visited Brazil and fell in love with the artistic communities of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. She toyed with the idea of a sustainable jewelry-making venture to bring artisanal products to larger global markets, but she had already been recruited for a management job at Adidas to start after graduation. In the summer of 2012, before starting her new job, she volunteered with a nonprofit in Rio, running workshops at a favela school.

"It had a dirt floor and a roof that leaked so much that school was canceled every time it rained, which was often," she recalls. "It also had a back room which housed a fancy, state-of-the-art computer lab — but no information about even how to log on to the computers, and the door to the room was kept locked."

The computers, it turns out, were the gift of a multinational company, likely a CSR action. Whether for good optics or good intentions, it was clear the company hadn't done much research.

"The right way to help this community would have been to ask what they needed, rather than swooping in with solutions that weren't practical or appropriate," she says. "I still carry the vision of that empty computer lab in a building without a floor."

Verdugo tells this story not to suggest that corporate initiatives to help those in need are pointless but rather to advocate for more and better efforts. She believes corporate volunteering should be a formalized or even mandatory workplace activity. As she herself experienced, such programs may put people in situations that make them feel uncomfortable — an essential first step in seeing the world from another perspective. This can lead to more compassionate and informed decision-making, and consequently more meaningful impact for those whose lives the volunteering is supposed to benefit.

The value of values

At the end of that summer, Verdugo left Rio for her prearranged job at Adidas. "After my time at the nonprofit, I felt conflicted. I was keen to start my new job, but I didn't want to leave my values behind. So, I asked my new boss if — in addition to doing the job I had been hired to do — my job description could be adjusted, because I really wanted to bring my values to work."

In her new boss she found a mentor who promised to make space for both, so long as Verdugo performed where she needed to. The upshot was an impact-driving product capsule collection supporting arts classes in the favelas, sold as part of the Adidas range. Verdugo realized that her reach and impact could be much greater as part of a multinational than if she had just tried to do it herself.

She also realized that you don't have to be the CEO to have impact. Everyone has the capacity to make small shifts in desired directions, she insists. Start with your own area of influence: Who makes your products? What's going on in your supply chain? Who are your partners? Are there any women in decision-making positions and on their boards? The answers to these questions will point you to where to focus on making changes.

Getting down to business

With the Adidas experience under her belt, Verdugo is now determined to bring her values to work again, this time at URBN, the global fashion corporation behind such brands as Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie, Free People and Nuuly.

Advocating for sustainability and social inclusion in an industry traditionally not known for those things is an uphill battle. However, being able to speak the language of business certainly helps in making the case for change, rather than simply moralizing about it being the right thing to do, which rarely moves the needle.

"Many values-based ideas fail because they're not aligned with the core business," she says. "Apply rigor and numbers, as you would when measuring success in any other area. I measured sustainable products and initiatives with the same KPIs used across the business and showed they came out ahead. *That* got people listening."

Verdugo carved out her own role, as director of sustainability and social impact, after pitching it to the CEO. As someone who perceives answers like "no" or "maybe later" as motivation,

Verdugo says the solution to these evasions is to state your case in terms managers are used to understanding. "Furthermore, do not be intimidated by the scale of the business if you see an opportunity for growth in an area that you're passionate about." Corporations are uniquely placed to deliver results on a large scale.

"We all have so much power and agency within us," says Verdugo. "Don't wait to make a difference. Your first day is as good a time as any."

Doing right, right where you are

- **Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.** Put yourself in situations where you will be forced to learn actively, sometimes the hard way.
- **Serve others.** Wanting to help but not knowing how induces anxiety and paralysis. Just get out there and do something, whether through volunteering or mentoring.
- **Bring your values to work.** Everyone has the capacity to make a difference. By asking yourself some key questions, you will see where changes need to be made.
- **Bring your values to the business.** Use your professional skills and abilities to prioritize social aims and measures as part of your core business, rippling out across your sector or industry.

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