Leading through a polarized world

Leading in fractured societies requires enlarged hearts and minds, and a focus on the big picture.



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By John Almandoz

Polarization is no longer just political — it permeates workplaces, schools and communities. Companies, once neutral ground, are increasingly drawn into culture wars. Leaders face a

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constant dilemma: speak up and risk a backlash, or stay silent and risk seeming indifferent. Society is always watching.

Boards of directors must remain vigilant about the values their companies endorse, recognizing that societies are fractured, and societal priorities shift rapidly and with little warning.

Companies cannot weigh in casually on public debates or allow CEOs to impose personal agendas, yet neither can they remain passive. The task is not about conforming to political correctness but about exercising sound judgment, anchored in corporate purpose. When purpose is authentic, meaningful and lived daily, it becomes too important to allow hijacking by fleeting controversies. Boards must discern when and how to act in ways that align with purpose — without politicizing the company or dividing employees.

A way to do this, in line with Arthur Brooks' *Love Your Enemies*, is to enlarge both hearts and minds: putting purpose and people at the center, while learning to embrace differences rather than fearing them.

Enlarging hearts: purpose beyond self-interest

Juan Antonio Perez Lopez, former dean of IESE, argued that the deepest motivation for work is transcendent: serving others with their good in mind.

Unlike rewards (extrinsic) or personal satisfaction (intrinsic), transcendent motivation centers on others' wellbeing. This shift — from "what's in it for me?" to "how can I serve?" — creates ripple effects that unite teams, build credibility with stakeholders, and repair trust in institutions.

Examples abound. Hubert Joly relied on human connection and caring to turn around the fortunes of electronics megastore Best Buy, as he recounts in his book *The Heart of Business*. Bob Chapman, at manufacturing firm Barry-Wehmiller, reframed leadership as a responsibility to care for people — he tells that tale in *Everybody Matters*. Companies like La Fageda and ISS Spain show how purpose-driven practices foster cohesion and generate results. Purpose becomes a magnet for talent, trust and resilience.

- **The takeaway?** Ask whether purpose genuinely engages employees and guides daily decisions. A purpose authentically lived transforms a company from the inside out and builds trust among employees and with stakeholders, thus playing a small

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part in restoring social peace.

Enlarging minds: from division to paradox

If enlarging hearts means embracing purpose, enlarging minds means embracing paradox. In *Love Your Enemies*, Brooks urges us to engage opposing views seriously, not dismiss them. That's not weakness, it's strategy. Organizations that welcome dissent and respect pluralism make better decisions.

Netflix learned this after its 2011 Qwikster fiasco, when leadership ignored unspoken objections and stock prices plummeted. Today, it intentionally "farms for dissent," encouraging disagreement before alignment. The result is more resilient choices and a culture where people feel safe to speak up.

Healthy competition, when rooted in respect, shared rules and the common good, elevates everyone. The danger comes when competition devolves into zero-sum thinking: "I win, you lose." Chasing narrow gains can destroy value and trust. Leaders must hold the bigger picture in view. Success means not only advancing organizational goals but also strengthening the social fabric on which those goals depend.

- **The takeaway?** Encourage dissent in boardrooms and C-suites. Don't collapse complexity into binaries. Some of the best strategies emerge from holding competing truths in tension.

Recovering the big picture

Neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist warns that modern life privileges left-brain habits: narrow, analytical, reductionist. The right brain — the seat of meaning, context and integration — is neglected. For business, that imbalance shows up in an obsession with metrics, simplification and control, while losing sight of the bigger picture: why we do what we do.

Left-brain reductionism also fuels ideological polarization. Boards and leaders must restore balance by creating space for reflection and for considering the big picture, while cultivating respect for the values represented on all sides. They must also recognize that business flourishes within a broader context that includes families and communities. Such elements don't distract from productivity, they're essential to it.

- **The takeaway?** Don't let efficiency eclipse meaning. Remember why you do what

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you do, not just what, how and for how much you do it.

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Professor of Managing People in Organizations at IESE Business School and holder of the Juan Antonio Perez Lopez Chair, named after IESE's late former dean, whose forward thinking on transcendent purpose as a motivating force for business is even more relevant today.

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