

How to approach impact

Five lessons from pioneering businesses



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Introduction

More business leaders want to achieve meaningful impact through their organisation. They don't want profit at all costs – they want to build a business that is commercially successful and has a positive impact. They believe these aren't mutually exclusive and want to role model this type of business – a kind of business (and business leader) that aims to leave a legacy and make the world a better place.

Businesses that want to deliver value more broadly than financial returns often share this journey and their progress in an annual impact report. I've spent the last two years reading and reviewing over 70 of these impact reports¹. They are a window into how businesses are thinking about impact and the approach they are taking to making a meaningful difference.

Whilst design plays an important role in effective communication (and many impact reports are beautiful), I enjoy peeling back the design and looking at the content:

What impact does the business want to have? What is its plan for doing that?

How does impact fit into the overarching vision and strategy?

Is the business setting itself up to enable positive impact? For example, through its governance.

In this report I share five insights into how businesses are approaching impact. For each, I explain why it matters and give an example of a business that is demonstrating best practice.

Businesses play a crucial role in creating a world that is peaceful, healthy, fair and prosperous. Conversely, if businesses don't change, we don't stand a chance. Therefore, I encourage you to reflect on the insights in this report and consider how they can help you scale up positive impact in your organisation – because we all have an important part to play in creating a better world.



¹ You can view my published impact report reviews [here](#).

01



**Be clear on the difference
you want to make**

Insight

Impact-led businesses clearly articulate the specific problem they are addressing and the positive impact they want to have.

Where a business has a clear mission this can lead to focused, intentional action. The businesses that aren't clear on the difference they want to make are often doing lots of good things (e.g. giving to charity, employee wellbeing initiatives, reducing their carbon footprint, and volunteering) but they don't have a clear focus for the positive impact they want to make, and so their overall impact is limited.

Why it matters

If you want to make a meaningful positive difference at scale, it's not enough to just 'do good'. A set of scattered, disconnected activities won't add up to make a meaningful difference to any particular problem.

Whereas, when you are crystal clear on the difference you want to make you can be intentional, focusing all your activities on delivering that mission. This can result in a meaningful difference. It's like niching – your business serves an ideal customer with its main solution. You must be clear on this to have a successful business that stands out in the market. With impact, you need one clear focus to make the biggest difference with your limited resources.

A clearly articulated mission can also be invaluable in attracting and motivating a whole range of stakeholders – e.g. employees, strategic partners, clients, and suppliers.

Who's doing it brilliantly?

Chimney Fire Coffee import and roast great tasting, high quality coffee.

Chimney Fire Coffee's mission is "to return value to coffee growers and producers by creating a fully transparent supply chain, with a direct sourcing model that assures mutually beneficial prices."

Their business was set up to challenge the status quo within the coffee industry where value is not distributed fairly and supply chains tend to be opaque. They explain the problem in detail in their impact report, and how their business model addresses this – e.g. through the contract terms they have agreed directly with producers and growers; and aiming for full traceability of physical product and financial flows.

Check out my review of Chimney Fire Coffee's impact report [here](#).

02

**Develop a strategic approach
to delivering impact**



Insight

Businesses need a structured framework for delivering their impact objectives, bespoke to their business and the positive impact they want to have.

Many businesses rely on generic frameworks like the B Impact Assessment and, whilst a great starting point, this can limit their overall impact.

Why it matters

It's not enough to identify the difference you want to make – this must be backed up by a strategy for delivering that impact, sometimes called a 'theory of change'. This helps you shift from ambition to meaningful action.

Your impact strategy is a framework that sets out your role in addressing the problem and how you will deliver impact. It should also identify collaboration opportunities and how you will influence wider system change.

A great strategy identifies priorities and enables decision making. The best strategies also state what you won't do.

Generic frameworks like the B Impact Assessment can be helpful for assessing your business's impact and identifying opportunities to reduce negative impact. On top of this, you must create the compass for delivering your own particular positive impact vision – that requires a bespoke strategy, specific to your business.

Who's doing it brilliantly?

Newcore Capital is a real estate investment manager that focuses on investing in UK social infrastructure assets (e.g. schools).

Newcore Capital has a robust and intentional approach to impact, and sustainability is integrated into every layer of their business. Their structured, strategic approach ensures all their plans, objectives and activities are aligned. For example, as well as looking at their own business's net zero pathway and the net zero pathway of their investment funds, they also take steps to reduce the in-use greenhouse gas emissions of the underlying assets through retrofitting buildings and helping tenants understand how to reduce emissions.

Check out my review of Newcore Capital's impact report [here](#).

03



**Integrate impact into
what you do**

Insight

Delivering impact at scale requires integrating impact into your products / services.

In many businesses, impact remains peripheral to their core business model. They are making operational changes (e.g. to their people or procurement processes, to their travel policy) but not to the products / services they provide.

Why it matters

When your impact activities are separate from the core business then the potential for positive change is limited. The core business demands investment of time and money, and impact can be seen as a distraction or nice-to-have. However, when positive impact is embedded into your products / services then positive impact and commercial success become mutually reinforcing.

Integrating your impact vision into your core business model means you are leveraging all your skills, networks, assets and time to make a difference. Any tensions between scaling impact and financial success are dissolved. The whole business is aligned on objectives and priorities, and you can deliver impact at scale.

Who's doing it brilliantly?

Bates Wells is a purpose-driven UK law firm.

Doing good is very much part of Bates Wells' day-to-day legal work. They use their skills as lawyers to have an impact – through client work, pro bono advice and collaborations that are working towards wider system change.

Bates Wells' impact reports are full to the brim with great examples of how positive impact is integrated into their core business. For example, they facilitated wider systems change through the co-creation of the Better Business Act and advised two leading UK charities (Macmillan and Crisis) on making equity investments that could catalyse innovation in cancer care and addressing homelessness.

Check out my review of Bates Wells' impact report [here](#).



04

**Identify metrics for
measuring progress**



Insight

The most impactful businesses spend time identifying and maturing the metrics that help them measure impact.

Many organisations are reporting activity-level data but not demonstrating the difference this is making in the real world or the progress they are making in relation to their impact vision.

Data tends to get better over time. The businesses that have been reporting impact for several years have had time to identify the right metrics (based on their impact strategy) and build a data management framework to collect the data that tells them whether their actions are having the desired impact.

Why it matters

If you want your business to make a noticeable dent on a social or environmental issue, then you need to measure whether what you are doing is actually making a difference, and whether there are opportunities to improve or scale up your impact.

It's not just about measuring your activities, it is about measuring the effects these have. Rather than simply taking action, it's important to understand why what you are doing matters, and whether it has made a difference.

You do this by creating a set of metrics, based on your impact strategy. This helps you measure the actions you are taking, how these are affecting outcomes, and ultimately the impact on a social or environmental problem.

Who's doing it brilliantly?

[Fairphone](#) exists to disrupt the electronics industry and make devices that are fairer and have a much lower impact on people and planet than traditional devices.

They have a three-pillar strategy for delivering their mission and use this as a framework for defining outcome and impact metrics. For example, part of their mission is to demonstrate that it's possible to make ethical electronics. Their mobile phones are designed to be in use for longer than traditional mobile phones. One of their outcome metrics is a longevity score, measuring whether their phones have a longer lifespan than traditional phones. The related impact metrics are e-waste avoided and greenhouse gas emissions avoided.

Check out my review of Fairphone's impact report [here](#).

05



**Change underlying
governance and processes**

Insight

If you want to make a truly meaningful difference, you must change the deep structures and processes within your business.

If you want your business to deliver significant change, a lot of what matters sits deep within the business. For example, how you make decisions and who is involved; how roles, responsibilities and accountability are structured and set out; performance management and compensation, especially at the executive level. To deliver impact at scale, you must focus on changing governance and processes.

Why it matters

Governance structures and organisational processes underpin a business and help determine outcomes. Think of them as a marble run. The way the pieces are slotted together determines the route the marble will take and where it will end up. If you want the marble to finish in a different place, you need to change the structure of the marble run.

If you don't change the deep structures and processes then the organisational system acts as a brake or blocker to your impact objectives.

Who's doing it brilliantly?

Tony's Chocolonely exists to end exploitation in the cocoa industry.

With its 'mission lock', Tony's has created a new ownership model that ensures Tony's mission ("together we'll end exploitation in cocoa") is protected forever. Tony's leadership team is now accountable through several public and judicial escalation levers should there be a mission drift away from their five sourcing principles.

This new type of governance model has the potential to create huge ripple effects if adopted by other businesses.

Check out my review of Tony's Chocolonely's impact report [here](#).

What about you?

As a business leader, you can play an important role in creating a world that is peaceful, healthy, fair and prosperous.

I encourage you to think about the social or environmental problem that your business is addressing and how you are going about doing that. When you have that clarity, you can start to shift your approach to impact from tactical to strategic – and so scale up your impact and make a meaningful difference.

It won't happen immediately. Becoming an impact-led business is a journey and the businesses I have mentioned in this report have been evolving and maturing their approach for many years. Having clarity on the difference you want to make and your strategy for doing that will help you create a roadmap for that journey and monitor your progress.

A clearly defined impact framework will also enable you to talk about your impact in a cohesive way that engages all your stakeholders and encourages them to help you deliver it.

Take action

If you are ready to take the next step and scale up your impact then here are three things you can do:

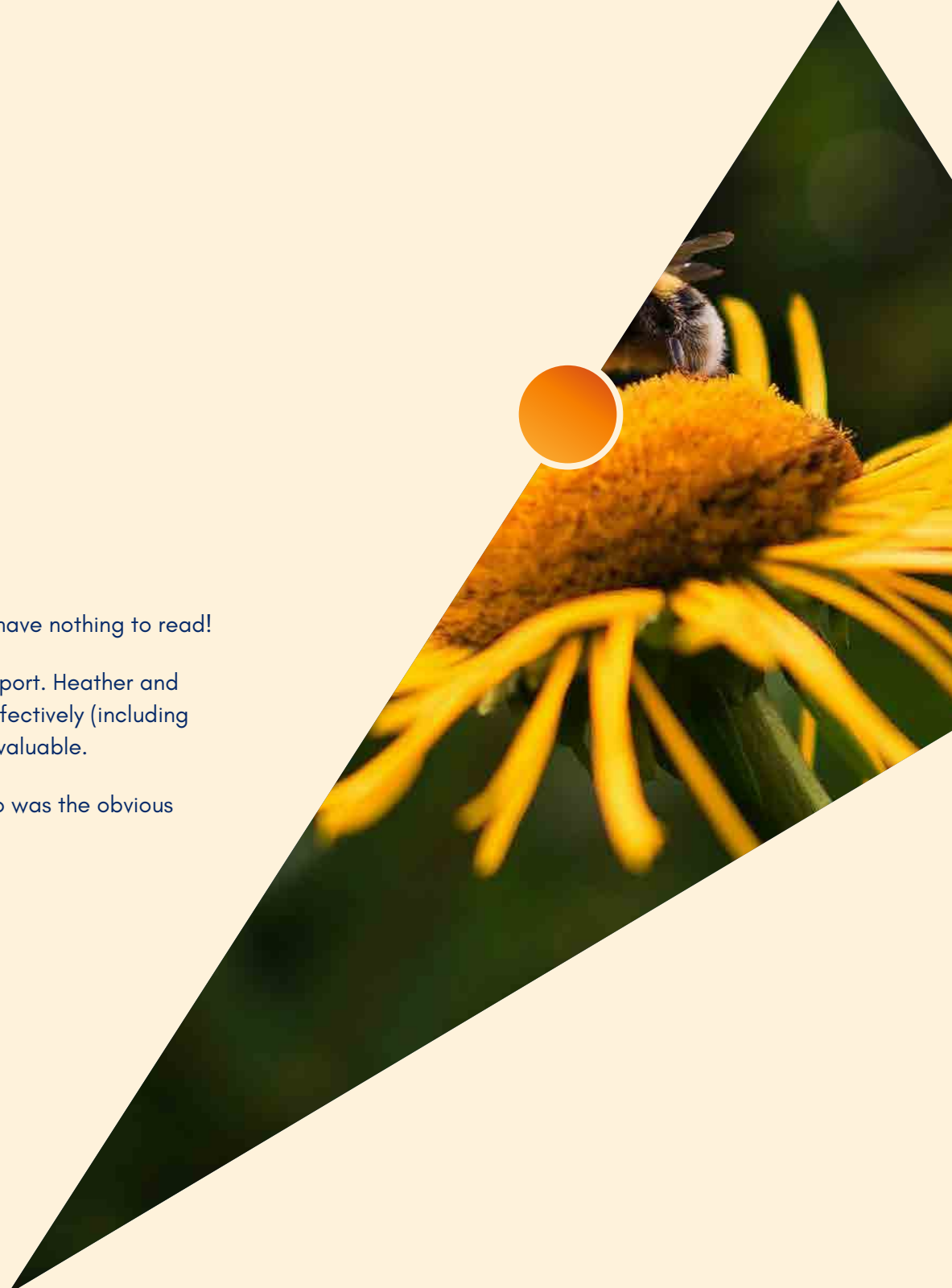
1. Join our next [Masterclass](#)
2. Download our free [Impact Framework Template](#)
3. Set up an [Amplify Impact Call](#) to discuss how we can help you
4. Sign up for our monthly newsletter – [Better Business Bites](#)



Thank you

This report is a team effort. Thank you to:

- All the people who are writing impact reports – without you I'd have nothing to read!
- Heather Davies for reviewing and providing feedback on this report. Heather and I work together to help our clients communicate their impact effectively (including through their impact report), so her input into this report was invaluable.
- Tara Pigott who designs Keartland & Co's impact reports and so was the obvious choice to design this report.



About Kearthland & Co

We help businesses scale up their impact

We work with business leaders who want to make a meaningful difference to the world through their business. They've started on the journey and done the easier, more obvious things ... and now they're stuck. They're looking for help to scale up their impact and engage their whole team in doing that.

We have three main solutions:

- AMPLIFY** – helps you create a framework for delivering and talking about your impact, so you shift from tactical and scattered to joined up and strategic
- CLARIFY** – helps you create an actionable roadmap for scaling up your impact and engaging your whole business
- REPORT** – helps you report on your impact journey and the progress you're making through an impact report

Find out more – www.earthland.co or hello@earthland.co

For regular impact insights and advice – sign up to our monthly newsletter [Better Business Bites](#).