

Navigating the Future of Sustainability Strategy

6 Insights for Corporate Sustainability in 2026



BY ALICIA BONNER, FELICIA DAVIS & MIGUEL PADRÓ | DECEMBER 2, 2025

Introduction

At the [Aspen Business & Society Summit](#), corporate sustainability leaders gathered to discuss how to best manage an increasingly volatile business landscape with challenges ranging from supply shocks and extreme weather to shifting political priorities. While today's context is unique, the skill set required to manage it is not. Sustainability leaders are already adept at cutting across business silos, building external relationships, and turning environmental or social risks into operational improvements.

As the scale and speed of change accelerates, these same skills must be applied in new ways to keep pace with a shifting landscape. Doing so will require leaders to reorient their teams, refresh their strategies, and experiment with approaches that match the moment. As one speaker noted, "We shouldn't make sustainability so different from other business challenges, which are always fraught with complexities, trade-offs, and competing priorities."

Six key actions can help sustainability leaders stay strategically relevant within their organizations:

1 Reset the Narrative

Center sustainability communication in business value. The calculus for corporate communication has changed significantly over the last year. To protect against scrutiny, many companies have gone quiet about their sustainability work. While silence may seem safe in the short term, it erodes trust and creates steep costs over time as credibility with investors, employees, and customers diminishes.

Leaders can help their companies navigate this new environment by linking sustainability narratives to business value. Companies grounded in a clear sense of purpose recognize that sustainability strengthens their reputation and the relationships that sustain their growth. Committed firms are already refining their message for this new era, while those guided mainly by market sentiment may struggle to find the right tone.

A three-part framework can help leaders decide when to engage:

1. Does the company have material interest in this issue?
2. Would staying silent mislead or harm trust?
3. Does the company have the power to influence this issue?

Grounding communication in these questions can align sustainability messaging with business realities and reinforce the link to material outcomes.

2 Sharpen the Business Case

Specify sustainability's role in business strategy. Sustainability leaders can no longer depend on internal support simply because it's "the right thing to do." They must continue to emphasize how sustainability creates competitive advantage, grows market share, or strengthens resilience. Demonstrating financial impact is essential to justify the resources and staffing needed to sustain initiatives, and avoid limiting the function to its reporting obligations. Building credibility with financial counterparts also allows sustainability teams to participate more meaningfully in capital allocation decisions, channeling investment toward capabilities that drive future growth.

From investments in circular inputs to traceable procurement, early movers have already locked in scarce resources, shaped new markets, and de-risked their operations. Those waiting for sustainability to become cheap or standardized may be left behind. Global momentum points in a clear direction: major markets such as Europe and China continue to invest in green infrastructure, and climate risk is now embedded in global regulation and disclosure standards. Leaders who use this moment to recalibrate strategy, align sustainability and finance, and invest in innovation will position their firms for long-term advantage.

3 Right-Size Collaboration

Address system-wide challenges with strategic collaboration. To tackle systemic issues and align capital behind major initiatives, it's increasingly clear companies can't go it alone. To align sustainability goals with cross-sector dependencies and market transitions, companies will need to seek coordinated opportunities to address them.

However, many high-visibility collaborations have stalled, suggesting a shift toward more targeted partnerships. Increasingly, leaders are pursuing lean, practical alliances that concentrate on specific external dependencies where collective progress is possible. Many have accepted the idea that effective collaboration doesn't have to mean global, headline-grabbing coalitions.

Collaboration, however, is rarely smooth. Partnerships can be unwieldy, coordination costly, and outcomes uncertain. This friction should spur fresh thinking about what makes collaboration succeed. Leaders in search of "recipes that work" will find that clearer frameworks, shared incentives, and practical leverage points will help unlock progress within complex systems.

4 Leverage the Supply Chain

Use the supply chain as a hub for sustainable impact. Companies are racing to adapt their sourcing and manufacturing amid a realignment of trade and geopolitical relations. Yet without a clear view of social and environmental impacts, companies risk higher costs and unintended consequences. In response, sustainability leaders are partnering more closely with procurement teams to model supply-chain scenarios and support faster decision cycles.

Companies aiming to make their supply chains more resilient are already integrating circularity—such as closed-loop material flows and recycled inputs—with climate and human-centered priorities like heat mitigation and energy reliability. They are also improving supplier governance through greater

transparency and accountability. Advanced digital tools have expanded visibility across the supply chain, allowing teams to assess risks and connect operational decisions to sustainability performance. Leaders described this moment as an opportunity to reimagine the supply chain as a central platform for sustainability, serving as a hub of innovation for procurement, supplier partnerships, and risk management.

5 Embrace AI, with Caution

Approach AI as a double-edged force for sustainability. Early adopters are exploring how AI can enhance sustainability measurement, improve decision-making, and scale solutions more efficiently. Within teams, AI may transform complex processes that once took months of manual work. Across sectors, there is a possibility that AI could supercharge large-scale decarbonization efforts.

At the same time, AI development carries major sustainability pressures, from energy use and grid strain to growing water demands. Concerns about AI's broader societal effects on jobs and social cohesion are equally pronounced. This duality—AI as both accelerator and hazard—should guide how leaders approach its potential. The challenge ahead is to harness that potential responsibly, while guarding against operational and ethical risk.

6 Invest in Nature

Position natural capital as a cornerstone of resilience. As floods, wildfires, and storms grow more frequent, top firms recognize that healthy ecosystems can mitigate damage and support faster recovery. Resilience planning now extends beyond physical assets, with nature-based investments serving as frontline defenses for both operations and communities. Restoring ecosystems, diversifying landscapes, and scaling regenerative practices are becoming core strategies for reducing weather-related losses.

By embedding natural capital considerations into procurement and supply-chain strategies, sustainability leaders can better anticipate disruptions from crop failures to resource shortages, and manage their impact. Firms that map and value natural capital not only safeguard critical resources but also reinforce trust with the communities where they operate. Together, these actions position nature as a strategic asset and essential pillar of enterprise resilience.

Conclusion

Evolving and often conflicting expectations are making sustainability challenges more complex, but also opening space for new approaches to business practice. The conversations captured at the Business & Society Summit show that sustainability leadership is no longer about advocacy, but alignment that links purpose with performance. The most effective leaders are redefining what business value means in a shifting landscape and using sustainability as a lens for innovation, not compliance. As firms navigate new economic pressures, technological shifts, and political expectations, sustainability leaders must adapt and innovate to remain strategically relevant.

We invite you to join the [Business & Society Program](#) to continue exploring how responsible decision-making evolves in this new era.