

## Greenhushing: Why Silence on Climate Means Action

Guest Speaker **LEAH SELIGMANN**

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**"The existential threat we're facing is climate change. The opportunity we have is economic transformation, which will create jobs and wealth and excitement."**

### **Nik Gowing**

Welcome to the Thinking the Unthinkable podcast, our latest leadership conversation.

Hello. I'm Nik Gowing. Well, let's continue to overcome so many negatives relating to the climate emergency. We want to bring you and share with you positives today from The B Team.

They are certainly working in a very determined and focused way to overcome these negatives. We want to hear how they're doing it.

Well, The B Team labels itself a collective of top business and civil society leaders – and I really mean top – who are determined to create new norms of corporate leadership.

Joining us from San Francisco is Leah Seligmann, Chief Executive of The B Team. She also has the title chief Change Catalyst.

Well, welcome Leah. Your mission is to catalyze business into showing that embracing climate and biodiversity are good for business, not heavy anchor chains that threaten growth and profit.

And I was very struck by what I heard you say in January at the SDG tent in Davos. Many there were rather down because of what President Trump, inaugurated just a few hours earlier, is determined to do to make impossible your kind of mission.

You said, with a big smile to a large number of like-minded leaders – and I have my notes here – "We are moving and grooving. We are not going to go backwards."

So do tell us: how are you moving and grooving and being so positive?

### **Leah Seligmann**

Nik, it's wonderful to see you. Thanks for having me today, and thank you for actually having a positive frame on what's happening in the world.

So much of the news that we get is negative – down, down, down, down, down – and the truth is that that only tells one piece of the story of what's happening.

So right now, what I see is business is looking at the economy. They're seeing the global changes, but nobody makes investments on a four-year cycle, and those investments that are in play right now are really continuing to move business forward.

And the will and the excitement still exist within leadership. Just, actually, just this week, there was new polling released by We Mean Business, which is a group I'm on the board of, and they poll business leaders across all of the major markets that have heavy fossil fuel footprints – US, India – and they found that 97% of these business leaders are actually in favor of shifting off of fossil fuels.

So we get this one story that everything is going backwards, but the truth is, the world has never gone backwards. It has always just continued, and that is why I think we're moving and grooving.

### **Nik Gowing**

So let me, let me check with you: is the new reality actually, that things are still moving very firmly in the right direction when it comes to what needs to be done on climate and biodiversity?

### **Leah Seligmann**

I don't think that things have ever moved firmly in a single direction, and that's something important for us to remember.

But the signals that we are seeing – the signals of change – is that more and more is going forward. And I think that that's what you hear from businesses.

They haven't decided to change their course completely because of a couple of headlines that are coming out of the US.

This is a global move to modernize, to innovate, to create – and that's where the money is going to be made.

And that's why you still see significant progress on the movement of clean energy, transition of more smart, sustainable agriculture – because it just makes business sense.

Now, I heard you say that we're going to bring new energy to this. Have you managed to do that – particularly since January, given the environment in which we're all having to live at the moment?

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, I heard you say that we're going to bring new energy to this. Have you managed to do that – particularly since January, given the environment in which we're all having to live at the moment? Absolutely, the environment requires new energy, and it doesn't require us to do everything the same as we always have done.

### **Leah Seligmann**

Absolutely, the environment requires new energy, and it doesn't require us to do everything the same as we always have done.

And I think that's the mistake that we sometimes make in our space, where we're just like, "Okay, I'm going to do it 10 times harder, I'm going to sign 10 more letters, I'm going to do whatever it takes."

What we're doing is figuring out what still holds right now, in this moment of tremendous backlash, and how do you kind of grow those seeds of collaboration and pieces there?

But what we've gotten lost in is this idea that a sort of fringe view holds the view of the majority, and it's so tempting in this moment where we kind of listen to our own echo chamber, our own podcast, over and over and over and over again.

I'm sure that this podcast gets a broad range of people that disagree with your views, but often you just sort of talk to yourself, and then you reinforce those views.

And what we've lost space for is the middle. We've lost space for debate. We've lost space for an activism of bringing people together and engaging with people that you don't know so well and you haven't been working with for the last 15 years.

And that's the opportunity for new energy. We have an opportunity to bring new energy towards bridge building, towards making it so that people see the sustainable economy as the economy that takes care of people, that gives them well-being and livelihoods and all of those different pieces – instead of it being a threat.

The existential threat we're facing is climate change. The opportunity we have is economic transformation, which will create jobs and wealth and excitement.

### **Nik Gowing**

What are you building a bridge between – from where to where, at the moment?

### **Leah Seligmann**

Right now, it's a societal bridge. It's not—it's a bridge between neighbors.

We have gone—and I think our businesses really feel this—where it's become so polarized that it's really hard to talk to your employees, it's hard to know what to say to your colleagues, it's hard to know what to say to your customers, it's hard to know what to say to your investors.

And it has to do with the loss of human interaction and human contact. And it's easy to reinforce your views if all of your views are coming from a self-selecting algorithm that just keeps on doubling down, doubling down.

But when you reach out to people and you connect with them, you start to see a broader thing. And that bridge building—right now, in a moment where we are taught to think, "If you don't agree with me, you are a bigot," or, "If you don't agree with me, you are somehow less than"—and that's just not the case.

Debate is what has brought society forward time and time again, because not one person has the answer. There isn't a silver bullet on any of these topics. It's going to require engagement and conversation and understanding.

Not to say that there aren't some things that we really need to hold with true respect—peer work, you know, peer-reviewed research, all of those things.

But there is an opportunity for everyone—I think our leaders are really modeling this—to reach out to the people closest to them, and then the next circle around, and the next circle around, so you start to build consensus, instead of continuing to drive these wedges.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now, one of the things—we heard it in Davos when you and I were together there, back then, at the beginning of January—is the word narrative.

In other words, changing the way in which many of these problems are being expressed, because they're too jargon-ridden, and there are too many of us all talking to each other with the jargon we all know about.

But actually, the public out there—and including some of the corporate leaders—don't really get it. How much is that a big challenge for you?

### **Leah Seligmann**

I think that's a big challenge for all of us, and the it's a challenge of connecting.

It feels good to know the acronyms, to be part of the alphabet soup that is any industry. You know, whatever industry you're in, you start hearing acronyms that your friends might not understand. And it's easy to alienate people, and it's easy to co-opt language that has no meaning—ESG, DEI, those things don't mean anything.

What the meaning is underneath it? What are we looking at? What are we thinking about? Why does this matter? What are the fundamentals? Why are they material to that business? Why do my, why should my customers care about it? Why should my employees care about it? And that is one of the biggest challenges.

So the narrative has been completely co-opted. Things that people in our movement worked decades on—to take the language of climate and sustainability and put it into an investor-based

language—were actually easy to knock down and to cut off because it was hard to trust, because it was just acronyms.

What we need to think about are really two pieces of it.

One, why does this, these actions make businesses more competitive, make economies more competitive, make countries more competitive? Why is it just sort of better, and how does it impact people? How are we taking care of our people?

And you think about—there are very few people that you will ever meet that wake up wanting to make the world worse for someone they know.

You want to take care of your employees, you want to take care of your family. You want to take care of those closest to you.

And then it kind of echoes out into your community and your country and the world, and leaning into that and how you can actually take care of the basics of livelihood—and having a roof over your head—while still doing things that are better for the environment is something that people just really, you know, instinctually feel like is the right place to be.

And that's what we've lost with the jargon. We've made it overly complicated, when at the end of the day, it's about taking care of, you know, your people, your places, loving where you live.

### **Nik Gowing**

Now let's let's talk examples. I mean, you are working with four large companies, major corporates, with very well-known names. Largely, some people are not so well known, but give me a couple of examples of how you're managing to change the thinking.

Inspire those who are watching, maybe the skeptics who are saying, "How does she do it? How do they do it?"

How do you as Chief Change Catalyst, or Chief Catalyst for Change? How do you do it? Give me a name or an example.

### **Leah Seligmann**

Well, I think you start at the basis of what the B Team is.

And the B Team, at our very heart, is a community of courage. It started with a group, you know, a very small group. At the time, we're 30. Now, it will always be a small group, but 30 of the business leaders and civil society leaders that were trying to drive the biggest systems change. And we started 10 years ago.

And you know why we started? They were lonely. They were talking to their teams, they were talking to their boards of directors, they were talking to their peers in their space and saying, "We think that taking care of people and business can be a force for good in the environment and these things," and they were laughed out of the room. People didn't have any idea.

And so they decided to band together with a group from cross sectors that also saw the competitive advantage, saw sustainability not as sort of another nice to have, where you throw a little bit of money at it, but actually a huge driver of value for them and their customers. And that was the mindset shift that they needed, the community of courage on.

And now today, what I think, 10 years later, and we look back at amazing things that the leaders have been part of together, that they've done behind the scenes, that they've done, where it always comes down to this idea that people need friendship, they need support.

This is a group of leaders that every day wakes up and it's like we are playing for our jobs, and they know the stakes are high. And they continue to be resilient and exciting and driven on this agenda, and that's because of this friendship. And so...

### **Nik Gowing**

How have they changed things then Leah? How have they changed things?

### **Leah Seligmann**

I think, if you can look across it like language that we've used a lot now in this space.

And I come from the energy sector, and this idea that the workforce, workers, and working people had to be against the environment, the B Team leaders, with the leadership of, you know, so many of them – but Sharon Burrow, Mary Robinson, Christiana Figueres – worked together with business leaders like David Crane, Oliver Bait Day, and Richard Branson to make it so that actually a people-centric, just transition was the language that first made it into sort of the global agreements around Paris and The SDGs. But also started to get integrated and operationalized within businesses.

And you can see sort of like that arc from ambition of, "Yes, we can live on a safe planet, and it can be good for people, and we can make business value," coming through legal language into the operations of different businesses.

And you kind of see it time and time again, that sort of mindset around lack of trade-off. And I'll tell you, kind of like the arc of that, where that goes: You start with these sort of global agreements, which are really inaccessible. Honestly, it's hard for people to kind of wrap your head around it. But you start there with those guideposts.

And then you have countries that start to kind of think about how they're going to structure their national policies. And then businesses see this opportunity to invest and to drive things forward.

And that kind of collaboration within them, within that group of having the most respected voices from a capitalist perspective, joining together with the most respected civil society voices and all saying the same thing creates change because nobody expects it.

### **Nik Gowing**

Let me check with you on one thing. Obviously, it's difficult to get data on this, but one of the phrases which is now being used, or words which is being used is green hushing.

In other words, corporate leaders who are really doing it but don't want to talk about it for fear of being having their heads snapped off, particularly because of the current US president, etc, etc. We don't have to go through the arguments.

How much of that is going on, do you believe? In other words, corporate leaders who don't want to make a meal of it in public, but are really getting on with it because they can see the advantages.

### **Leah Seligmann**

I think that's going on to a huge degree. We had greenwashing, and now we have green hushing. Maybe we get to green real talk, and that's where we go, where people just do what they say they're going to do and actually do it, versus shouting about what they want to do and underperforming.

And there is fear, I think, in this space, that people aren't out there making huge commitments, they're not doing the work, and there should be fear that maybe some people are falling back. But the places where it makes business sense, where it makes sense for your customers and your communities and your license to operate, and all those things continue, and businesses know that.

They also know that what they say now will be used against them, and I think that that's just a reality of the situation. If you're going to get your stock price tanked by a tweet, then you're going to be a little bit careful about what you say. And we need to understand that businesses don't, you know, we're watching it now with the global supply chains, they don't really order themselves overnight. It takes time, and four years is a very short period of time.

And so I think that the corporates that are smart have strategic patience, and they're still making the investments.

### **Nik Gowing**

Well, look, we've got three minutes left. Let's, let's just try and bring this to a very sharp conclusion to convince the skeptics, to convince those who are not really fully on board at the moment.

Describe the flow of bold ideas that really is exciting you now and proving that there's an extraordinary, radical, innovative thinking and the determination out there, which you as the B Team can identify and can harness for others.

### **Leah Seligmann**

So I think that the piece here that is, like, gets me up every day, and kind of makes me sizzle, is the fact that we have invented things in the last five years that nobody, everybody would have thought was science fiction.

And that's the place the limit is limitless possibility of human creativity and collaboration gets me really excited. I mean, just the other day, I had a conversation with a chat bot that knew more than I would ever know.

And so a piece of that is just sort of like the everyday little shifts that you see that make you so delighted and excited. And then you back that up with real numbers, like Ikea had an absolute reduction of 30% of their emissions while growing revenue 23%.

You know, Allianz has a huge investment portfolio, and they have been able to have those emissions for corporate portfolio since 2019. Like you see these things happening in real time that give you hope that we're kind of on the right trajectory.

And then you see somebody make energy out of a bicycle, and it's just thrilling and exciting. So it's the combination of real business results with innovations that help business delight and enjoy and inspire their customers.

### **Nik Gowing**

It's a formidable challenge you set yourself in the last 30 seconds. Just help me understand—you say on your website, "future generations are counting on us." How much can future generations be reassured that what you're doing is really achieving the change that is needed to meet these phenomenal and ferocious goals which are being set for net zero and so on?

### **Leah Seligmann**

We are all building blocks on each other. Future generations are depending on us, and we are depending on them. I think that mutual relationship is really important in the question that you're asking, because we will put together the rails. We'll start to build out what that economy will look like. My kids are going to see the results of that. My grandkids are going to see the results of that shifted economy. I might not see it all.

And we have to have trust and faith that at the end of the day, people want to create a place where they can enjoy nature. People want to be in a workplace where they're respected, and those characteristics and values will continue to shine through.

Our kids are going to come— I mean, you think about what one little girl in Sweden inspired a couple of years ago. Like, we are really on the cusp of having the smartest generation of children who are going to be able to help us take the mission, take the torch that we're carrying right now, and deliver it to the finish line.

### **Nik Gowing**

But what you're saying is you believe that what the B Team is doing, proves that this is now achievable?

### **Leah Seligmann**

Absolutely, it's achievable. And it requires, you know, there are the hard business facts that show it's achievable, and there's the hope and optimism that we all have to have to continue to push through. Those two pieces—heart and mind—are important in this challenge, and B Team leaders have that.

### **Nik Gowing**

Well, great, Leah. Thanks so much. You can reference every detail that Leah's just given us, and the transcript of the podcast is posted in parallel on our website, along with contact details for us and Leah and The B Team for you to be in touch.

Do please join us when we next have a conversation about thinking the unthinkable. None of this is unthinkable anymore, as Leah has just said. Subscribe to our YouTube channel, where you'll find all our podcasts, and from me, Nik Gowing, until the next time, keep thinking unthinkable. More than ever, it's both possible and necessary.

From Leah and from me, bye, bye, you.