

Speech Excerpt: Fortune 100 CEO

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The primary purpose of business is to create prosperity.

By prosperity I don't mean profit.

Profit is the measure of the health of a company. Prosperity is the measure of the vitality of society.

This has always been the promise of the free market system – that individuals and businesses, liberated from needless intrusion, can and will produce the greatest benefit for society.

This belief is fundamental for members of _____ - and American business has a remarkable history of delivering on that promise.

These days we find business being challenged in the public sphere. Public confidence in us has eroded, and our mandate to lead is being questioned.

The most recent Edelman Trust Barometer provided some sobering data for us to consider. It showed fewer than half of Americans trust business to do what is right.

60% think CEOs are driven more by greed than a desire to make a positive difference in the world.

I know a lot of CEOs and that simply isn't right.

But perception is reality.

If society doesn't trust us to do what's best for it, we risk losing our license to operate.

We can't afford that and neither can America.

So how do we create prosperity?

We must first be profitable. Our businesses must thrive, or no one wins.

We must also create prosperity for our employees, our customers and the communities we serve.

Many people feel we aren't doing enough. Recent research into the financial condition of American citizens perhaps energizes these critics. Let me share some findings with you.

A new study from the United Way says more than 40% of U.S. households cannot afford the basics of a middle-class lifestyle — rent, transportation, child care and a cellphone.

For every American living below the poverty line, more than two are above the line but below the cost of paying ordinary expenses.

The study calls this segment the “economically forgotten” and it appears to be growing despite the overall health of the economy.

Our leaders in Washington are often too focused on partisan agendas that benefit neither our businesses nor our communities to provide us with the sort of leadership we need.

In their view, ideology trumps cooperation. Fighting against each other gets in the way of fighting for those we all serve. An unwillingness to consider opposing viewpoints prevents us from getting important issues on the agenda and working together in ways that make the most of all our strengths.

Compromise is a lost art and statesmanship is something our children only encounter in history books. So where will much-needed leadership come from?

Right here in this room.

Look around you. You’re surrounded by some of the nation’s brightest and best leaders, people with experience at getting things done. At solving problems. And most importantly, at inspiring others to come together around a shared vision.

In the coming year, we must work diligently to reach out across party lines. We must identify and collaborate with pragmatists who care more about getting things done than they do ideology.

Despite the cynicism expressed in the United Way study, we are not alone. A 2016 Deloitte report showed 87% of young Americans believe businesses should do more than just make a profit.

But here’s the wonderful thing: They want to help.

Millennials have posted the highest volunteerism rates of any recent generation, and a Forbes article last year described how central the opportunity to give back is to the job satisfaction of these young workers.

Americans – especially younger ones – aren’t asking us to make the world a better place. They’re asking us to join them in making the world a better place. They want to partner with us in creating prosperity.

Together our commitment is growing. Approximately \$4 billion is now being raised through workplace giving each year. 86% of companies believe that employees expect them to provide opportunities to engage in the community.

These companies and workers are to be commended, and so are you for supporting so much pro-community service.

The poverty and “economically forgotten” conversation is instructive for us because it provides insight into how we can best serve our society.

When I hear the phrase “end poverty,” it sounds like a missed opportunity.

We all agree poverty is terrible. The human toll is unacceptable. We would all like to live in a world with no poverty.

But setting out to “end poverty” is a limiting goal. It suggests we should simply find a way to bump everyone up to an artificial line, declare victory and go home.

It’s a goal that’s about doing the minimum.

It smacks of giving instead of empowering. Approaching poverty from this angle assures limited success because the bar is set so low.

Americans are known for setting a high bar, though. And then clearing it. We shouldn’t focus on minimum acceptable standards. We should focus on creating maximum opportunity and prosperity.

Instead of helping people afford the basic necessities, we should work to promote learning, achievement and advancement. Our goal should be a nation where everyone is above the poverty line and no one is economically forgotten.

Even if we believe that isn’t 100% possible, this must be the destination we move toward.

In business, as in every phase of life, you accomplish great victories by thinking broadly.

Everyone in this room is committed to the same goals in their own companies and you’ve posted an admirable record of success.

But we must do more. We should do more for individuals and communities because it’s the right thing to do.

Individuals live better, happier, more meaningful lives when they approach it with purpose, and I believe businesses should operate with purpose, too.

Creating prosperity begins with defining purpose in more than economic terms. It means thinking about community.

It means creating a culture of opportunity and success for everyone, whether they're our customers, our shareholders, our employees, or simply our neighbors.

Society expects more from all of us, and they should – because we have the resources, and because we can.

American business has always enjoyed the freedom to innovate and operate as it sees fit because our founders believed that freedom was the path to prosperity for all.

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