The Sustainable Business Pioneer

A portrait of Lise Kingo
Introduction 4
The sustainable business pioneer 6
The rise of a pioneer 8
Redefining business 10
The world’s most sustainable company 12
Widening the ambitions 14
Connecting world of business leaders 16
New goals and ambitions 18
The rise of a sustainable business leader 20
Never has the world needed sustainable pioneers this much. Climate and Corona prove the need strongly and urgently. Even if the two crises might be different, they are linked by one word: Sustainability. And that spells out where to find the common solutions. The only – and strongest – cure against climate change, loss of biodiversity and pandemic outbreaks – is sustainable societies. This is further underlined by the fact that still more scientists see clear interconnections between these crises and call for interconnected and systemic solutions.

In a world like this we will be looking for pioneers and frontrunners that think and act sustainably and demonstrate interlinked and hybrid solutions - leaders who have the courage, the ability and endurance for paving new ways forward. This article presents and portrays such a pioneer - Lise Kingo.

Lise entails all the basic qualifications needed to develop and build sustainable societies. She chose to do it in the business sector, but it could have been in any sector because her mindset and deep understanding of what it takes to transform people and organisations could be applied in all parts of society. Her forward thinking leadership and outstanding effort has greatly influenced a global company such as Novo Nordisk and a multinational UN organization like UN Global Compact. Here she has made a big and lasting difference.

I have known Lise for around 30 years and always seen her as a true pioneer, but not as a typical business person. Her background is different and her approach too. Personally, I have always sensed and admired her broad views and holistic mindset and her ability to transform knowledge of ancient times and philosophies into today’s and tomorrow’s reality. And this article documents proof of that - and it was a great pleasure for me to write it.

At Sustainia we have benefited greatly from a long time partnership with her - both from her time at Novo Nordisk and especially as CEO and Executive Director of UN Global Compact. She had played an important role in our joint success with identifying and publishing global reports on the world’s most sustainable solutions and opportunities. Together with Norwegian DNV GL we formed an outstanding alliance and due to Lise Kingo’s strong commitment we succeeded in reaching out to a wide global audience.

Now, Lise is stepping down from her pioneerin job as the head of UN Global Compact. This, in itself, is an obvious reason for writing her fascinating story to inspire the world of business leaders on what it takes to be a sustainable leader. But the current events and the accelerating COVID-19 crisis make the timing even more perfect. Navigating in a perfect storm of so many, so big and so complex challenges takes not only a hybrid of competencies. It calls for a new mindset, and that is the basic message in this story of a sustainable business pioneer. And that makes it a must-read - not least today.

Sustainia is proud of having this opportunity to publish Lise Kingo’s unique achievements and making them widely known. She deserves it - and the world needs it.

Erik Rasmussen
Founder of Sustainia
The sustainable business pioneer

A personal story about turning a UN institution into the leading transformer of global business.

Have you ever imagined that a UN institution could be positioned as one of the world’s leading business transformers? If not, then visit the UN Global Compact at 685 Third Avenue in the heart of New York. It looks like any corporate office in Midtown Manhattan, full of busy, diverse people and a lot of buzz. But make no mistake – this organization is different. It is uniting business for a better world.

In other words: It helps companies worldwide transform to the market realities of the decade ahead - a reality where sustainability is a key driver of competitiveness and a license to operate. Being best in the world and for the world. The recipe is clear: An alignment with the Ten Principles and the Global Goals – all derived from its home at the heart of the United Nations. They are the backbones of a new integrated leadership strategy, fit for the challenges a decade ahead.

“More than 10,000 companies globally and 3,000 organizations have joined the UN Global Compact movement to create the world that we all want“

The initiative’s impact on business leadership is already moving fast and steady forward and is a proof of the concept. Today, more than 10,000 companies globally and 3,000 organizations have joined the UN Global Compact movement to create the world that we all want – transforming business in all sectors to put principles and responsibility at the heart of strategy, operations and stakeholder relations. Through this movement, they have discovered how to become more financially successful, better workplaces and stronger brands. A great and convincing business case.

The UN Global Compact, together with its participants, is now leading a major transformation that makes it stand out as the largest global lab for sustainable business leadership. Four years into the Global Goals, the world is not on track to achieve them – particularly on climate and deepening inequalities – but 85% of UNGC companies are aware and taking action on the Goals, while more than 90% are embedding the Ten Principles in their business operations. The "Making Global Goals Local Business" campaign across the world has been a great success, but the next step is to become more ambitious and deepen the efforts in every company. There is no Plan B – and the Global Goals will not become a reality without the business sector.
The rise of a pioneer

The UN Global Compact’s transformation from a traditional UN institution to a sustainable leadership lab is led by a woman who in herself personalizes the DNA of sustainability: Lise Kingo. To understand what have been her driving forces and motivations for transforming UN Global Compact, it is important to take a deep dive into her mindset and what formed it.

It is not just a fascinating story about a fascinating woman. Somehow her mindset and approach to sustainable leadership is an inspiring lesson about what it takes to make fundamental transformations of business models and philosophies. In the world of sustainability, Lise Kingo is a pioneer. She meets the basic criteria: “A person who prepares for others to follow”.

After five years at the helm of the UN Global Compact – the world’s largest sustainable business initiative – she will step down in June 2020 and hand over the baton to her successor. As Lise says – “the time is now”. So this is the story of a real sustainable pioneer. Hopefully, others may find the courage and the inspiration to continue down the same path to transform our world and deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – and build sustainable competitiveness.

“This is Lise’s foundation: a deep-rooted understanding of ancient times and the origins of who we are – the forces that drive human behaviour: Our norms, values and principles”

Lise’s curiosity extends to the need to understand the threads between past, present and likely futures. What makes cultures and civilisations rise and fall? What makes ethics, values and democracies thrive and flounder? What are the rites of passage a person, a leader, an organization, a culture must pass? What are the ups and downs; the swinging of the pendulum for change? How does cultural transformations work – in the past and today?

As a change agent, this grounding in a classical enquiry model has provided Lise with a unique resilience and resourcefulness to navigate through the unknown, often in the face of opposition. Those who have worked with Lise, will know that she at any given time can pull out a Greek philosopher or parable that helps us get our bearings, because they allow us to recognize age-old dilemmas and the human forces that drive them, alongside the ethical principles that may guide our actions.

Her deep understanding of the driving forces of change through history seems to be an important and integrated part of her own leadership philosophy - and a way to understand and explain her later career.

Lise’s journey begins in a loving home where she, a precocious only child, early learns that ‘anything is possible’. Lise’s well-honed curiosity extends to how ‘it all fits together’. With a keen interest in history and cultures, she launches into a humanistic university education focusing on the history of religions and Greek and Roman cultures. This is Lise’s foundation: A deep-rooted understanding of the origins of who we are – the norms, values and principles that drive human behaviour.
Redefining business

Lise starts her professional life in a dynamic and fast-paced advertising agency. Here she learns about a Danish based multinational company called Novo Nordisk with a charismatic CEO, Mads Øvlisen. He embodies strong humanistic qualities in a competitive business environment. She knows straight off that this is a place where she would like to work one day. And of course, so it goes. In 1988 she becomes a maternity temp in the promotion department of the Novo Nordisk enzymes business. Later, Novo Nordisk splits up into two wholly independent enterprises - Novo Nordisk (pharmaceuticals) and Novozymes (enzymes).

She quickly realises that to match her ambitions and excel in a business world, she will need a business degree. While working full-time, she adds a Graduate Diploma in Marketing from Copenhagen Business School to her Humanistic degree. This does not mean that she in any way forgets about her classical background. Lise marries the best from both worlds and makes it her own. In an interview with Copenhagen Business School upon becoming their 2018 ‘Distinguished Alumna’, she says about her dualistic background:

“Humanist values and principles are what have driven me throughout my career. I have worked almost constantly to ensure both sustainability and social responsibility as sound, profitable business practices – preferably making the one a prerequisite for the other.”

The year is 1992; Lise has been appointed head of Novo’s new ‘Green Department’ and it is in this capacity that she attends the first UN Earth Summit in Rio de Jainero. The Summit is strongly influenced by the Gro Harlem Brundtland Report ‘Our Common Future’, and its definition of sustainability.

The Earth Summit turns out to become a defining moment – both on a personal level and for Novo Nordisk. It is an eye opener for Lise, who leaves with a new understanding of the need for business – and Novo Nordisk – to jump into the fray as a necessary and integral part of sustainable development. The Earth Summit’s sustainability principles later become captured in the Triple Bottom Line model that for decades will define Novo Nordisk’s approach to sustainable business.

This is also where sustainability becomes personal. What few know is that Lise is also expecting her son Christian, and what she hears in Rio hits home on a profoundly personal level. It is here she makes the pledge that becomes the ‘true North’ for her entire career - to always use her platform in life to drive change for a better and more sustainable world, for her own child and for future generations.

Rio lit a fire, and at home, CEO Mads Øvlisen and head of the enzymes business Steen Risgaard are ready to embrace these new ideas. The coming years offer a lot of opportunities for ‘firsts’. For the company’s enzymes business Lise leads the development of the first environmental strategy, pioneers Denmark’s first environmental report, and later she also introduces the novel concept of social and environmental reporting. Sounds easy? It is anything but.

Both internally and among NGOs, resistance is palpable. Lise has placed herself squarely between two worlds that resist the marriage. At one of the company’s annual “International Management Meetings” Lise must tolerate ridiculing and bullying from the entire marketing organization for the sheer silliness of thinking that sustainability has any place in ‘the business of business’.

Most would have packed and left. Not Lise. These are the years where an interesting transformation takes place. Like a sword hardened through fire, for every pushback, Lise becomes even more determined, even more hardened, to take the resistance of the organization and its stakeholders as the inevitable ‘rites of passage’ for change. She later explains her experience as the proverbial mouse running through a maze: Every time the mouse comes to a dead-end, it must return and try another passage, until it finds its cheese.
The world’s most sustainable company

Gradually she succeeds in opening up the company to its stakeholders to understand and address their concerns - supported by the British sustainability guru John Elkington, perhaps best known as the ‘father’ of the Triple Bottom Line principle. Lise meets John at a time where he, as the author of the Green Consumer Guide, is among the biggest threats to Novo’s enzymes business, raising concerns of gene-modified enzymes in the environment. After having visited the company and seen its manufacturing processes, he becomes one of the firm’s greatest supporters, and a lifelong friend of Lise.

In 2002 Lise becomes the company’s first and only female Executive Vice President and joins Executive Management in Novo Nordisk. During the next decade, Lise utilizes her platform to drive change at a scale and pace that in 2012 earns Novo Nordisk, as the first Danish company, the prestigious recognition ‘the world’s most sustainable company’ by Toronto-based media firm Corporate Knights. But it requires stamina, patience and diplomacy.

In these years, Lise delivers results that earn worldwide attention from the whole sustainable business world. Among other things, Novo Nordisk joins the WWF’s Climate Savers campaign, setting an ambitious 10-year carbon emission target, which is achieved five years ahead of schedule. It is among the first companies in the world to produce an integrated Triple Bottom Line report.

“In 2012 earns Novo Nordisk, as the first Danish company, the prestigious recognition ‘the world’s most sustainable company’

Novo Nordisk also earns one of the strongest reputations in the healthcare sector, thanks to its ‘activist’ brand platform Changing Diabetes®, from where the company drives advocacy and public private partnerships to improve the lives of people with diabetes. By 2015, Novo Nordisk has been among the top-three pharmaceutical sector leaders in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index for over 16 consecutive years, and in 2014, the company is ranked number 2 in the global Access to Medicines Index for its commitment to changing diabetes in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

In 2012, as Lise’s organisation sets out to revitalise the company’s values and purpose together with thousands of colleagues from around the world, decades of hard work is rewarded from the grassroots. The people of Novo Nordisk recognise that Changing Diabetes® is the company’s legacy and purpose and the Triple Bottom Line is the company’s way of doing business. More than that, it is what makes people most proud of working for the company.
Widening the ambitions

After more than 25 years with Novo Nordisk, a new opportunity for taking sustainable business leadership to the next level turns up. It’s September 2015. Lise is appointed new CEO and Executive Director of the UN Global Compact (UNGC) by former UN Secretary General, Ban-Ki Moon. After more than 25 years as a business executive, she is now entering the world of diplomacy. This is another defining moment in Lise’s career and an accolade of the highest order of her pioneering leadership in the world of sustainability.

Together with her mentor, long-time friend Mads Øvrlisen, she walks into the UN General Assembly hall, knowing that the appointment will be made official in a moment. And it is not just any ordinary UN General Assembly; this is the year where world leaders are adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Climate Agreement.

This seminal moment in history becomes the starting point for a new turn in Lise’s career, where she will be able to apply all she has learnt throughout a career in business. She understands that she has been given a unique platform to unite business and the United Nations behind a mission of delivering on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to make the world a better place. What she does not yet fully realize is that for the UN Global Compact to lead the biggest transformation of the 21st century, she will need to change the organization from within – creating a major business turnaround.

Back from the high of the UN General Assembly, reality hits. The UN Global Compact may be the world’s largest sustainable business organization but it is a true entrepreneurial initiative - not a modern, efficient, professional organization that is able to execute a global strategy. Never has the world needed a platform like the UN Global Compact more, but the organization is not ready to embrace the opportunity to lead this change.

In the years that follow, Lise channels all of her energy into pacing the change. With a great sense of purpose and optimism she empowers her organization to always set their ambition a notch higher, and then she turns it up another notch. Like a Chinese plate artist she keeps all the moving parts in the air. Outwards, the organization delivers great content; internally people are working hard to keep up. She is constantly on the move, making it her business to meet her local teams and their network of business signatories where they are.

When Lise stepped into her new role with the UNGC, she created a “100-day-plan” with her Management Team. Three simple “Must Win Battles” had to be addressed: Growth, Organization and Brand. She started with the hardest parts – getting her own house in order: The creation of a new business model, a new organizational model, a five-year strategy encompassing organization, brand, value proposition and financial performance. She sharpened the purpose, brand identity and value proposition of the UN Global Compact. She translated the strategy into annual business planning processes with short to medium term objectives with a Balanced Score Card enabling clear line-of-sight from strategy to implementation.

She formulated the UN Global Compact Way: A shared set of values and behaviours to serve as the guiding spirit for the work of every staff member. Throughout the process she succeeded in delivering on her vision of “One UN Global Compact”, involving her team in New York and the +70 Local Networks in co-creating every step of the way.

Her turnaround plan meets its nemesis at a Local Network Meeting in Dubai in early 2016. Lise is proposing a complete overhaul of the revenue sharing model with the Local Networks. In the future, businesses of a certain size will need to pay a fixed fee to participate and revenue streams will be split between the global organization and the Local Networks. The Local Networks are not happy. What impact will this have on their revenues and level of independence? Will many large companies leave if they are asked to pay a fee? This becomes one of many occasions where the importance of trust and standing shoulder to shoulder as “One Global Compact” shows its strength.
Making Global Goals Local Business

With a fine-tuned organization behind her, Lise sets out to change the world, inviting the over 14,000 Global Compact businesses and other organizations to be part of the global movement of “creating the world we want”. From being mainly a think tank, a new “Theory of Change” is in place to scale up and accelerate action. Now, the UN Global Compact must address not only “innovation and thought leadership”, but also focus on “scaling globally” through the Local Networks and “creating impact and an enabling environment”.

In 2016 Lise and her team coins the global campaign “Making Global Goals Local Business” to create awareness and action on the new Global Goals, anchored in the Ten Principles, across the world together with the Local Networks. Once again, her business background proves useful and the Compact creates a wide set of activities and tools to drive the vision of building a global movement of responsible companies and organizations to create the world we all want – the essence of the UN 2030 Agenda.

In the following years, the Compact drives important innovations through a series of Action Platforms that activate some of the world’s leading businesses and innovators to co-create new standards for how businesses can help drive the Global Goals. Topics like reporting on the Global Goals, financing of the Global Goals and how to create breakthrough innovations for the Goals are among the most important management themes. Climate, oceans, health and water are key environmental themes, while decent work, gender equality and good governance constitute important social and societal themes - all with the prospect of providing clear guidance to businesses on how to address the Global Goals, based on the Ten Principles. Through the new online UNGC Academy, a library of tools and resources, such as the SDG Action Manager, makes it possible for Compact to reach every business across the world directly and through the Local Networks.

"The key ask from the Compact to companies is embed the Ten Principles and Global Goals into the heart of business strategy, operations and stakeholder engagement."

But after the first four years with the Global Goals, the World is still lagging far behind the Global Goals. Particularly on climate change and social inequalities. Compact’s annual Progress Report and the Accenture/UNGC CEO Study clearly shows that while more than 90% of businesses have integrated the Ten Principles into their strategies and operations, and 85% have identified the Sustainable Development Goals they would like to focus on, it does not translate into real and sustainable impact on the ground. It is still too incremental, too superficial, not sufficiently transformational to make the needle move behind each of the Global Goals. While companies are increasing their SDG actions, only 46% are fully aligning them with their core business, and only 39% set goals that are sufficiently ambitious, science-based and aligned with societal needs. And while 45% track progress on their actions, only 31% assess their negative impacts. Even fewer have made impact assessments in core social areas such as Human Rights and Labour, not least in their supply chain where the potential for change is likely greatest. Here only 13% of businesses act through their suppliers.
The business sector is crucial for making the Goals a reality in 2030, and with ten years left to deliver, the time is ripe to ramp up both expectations and action.

On this backdrop, once again drawing from her previous business experience, Lise introduces the new “SDG Ambition” to kickstart the “Decade of Action”. Now, the Compact asks companies to seriously increase ambition and fully embed Principles and Global Goals into business strategy, operations and stakeholder engagement.

- To seriously increase ambition means setting transformational goals that are so ambitious that they serve as a motivator to stretch your organization to drive real innovation and find new ways to deliver, such as science-based targets aligned with a 1,5 degrees scenario on climate change, or ensuring that 30% of senior management and board members are women.

- Fully embedding Principles and Goals means that sustainability is not an afterthought – the Ten Principles and the Global Goals must be fully integrated into core business and nesting in your purpose. From the strategic level, to the operational level and into stakeholder engagement.

The new “Implementation Model” (see figure) is based on best practice from UNGC companies, and follows a very systematic and logic approach. The first fundamental step starts at the strategic level:

Ensure that corporate sustainability is anchored in the purpose and governance of the company - creating a force and positive momentum towards the SDGs. Next step is to anchor key Global Goals and Principles in the overall corporate strategy and in the Balanced Business Scorecard.

When that is done the model has to be integrated across all operations: in product development, production, value chain management, people development and remuneration, and refocusing financial priorities and processes to the SDG reality.

Finally, it is equally important to enhance stakeholder engagement. This is basically about strategic storytelling - how to involve and engage stakeholders, customers and the public in the company’s sustainable turnaround, advocating for change and co-creating new solutions through partnerships. It should be reflected in the reporting and the overall corporate communication and in the marketing messaging.

Within the next two years, the Compact, its Local Networks and Patrons will engage more than 1,500 companies in making the SDG Ambition a reality uniting business behind a set of clear SDG ambitions that are anchored in science and aligned with pressing societal needs. The needle must move and in a post-COVID-19 world the challenge of making the 17 goals a reality is even bigger.
Stepping up ambition

In 2019 the Compact demonstrates how the Ambition works in real life. Right after the presentation of the IPCC Report in November 2018, that sets the alarm for the prospect of a 1.5 – 2 degrees future, UN Global Compact takes action. Lise and her team initiates a global campaign for 1.5 Degrees Business Leadership, motivating companies around the world to sign up for science-based targets, aligned with 1.5 Degrees. It is far from an easy task but for the time being hundreds of companies have enrolled and as frontrunners gain valuable experiences to be shared and hopefully generate a wider movement.

And that is exactly how UN Global Compact works: It sets ambitious targets and goals, involves and engages frontrunners and lets them set the new standards and norms for sustainable businesses. Even if that approach is relatively new it seems to catch on and might create important breakthroughs towards 2030. But not fast enough for Lise. She wanted to speed up the process. So she did.

“In five years UN Global Compact has become one of the most attractive platforms for CEOs and C-suite executives to meet, and exchange learnings and achievements within corporate sustainability”

Prior to the World Economic Forum Summit in Davos January 2020, Klaus Schwab writes to all participants asking them to sign up to the UNGC lead campaign “1.5 degrees Celsius – our only future”. The annual WEF Risk Report has defined the “Climate Emergency” as the mother of all risks, and the bold work of UNGC and its partners is a perfect frame of reference. Another major focus at the Summit was stakeholder capitalism - how companies can embrace wider responsibilities and both be best in the world and for the world. The SDG Ambition and its Implementation Model - presented by the UN Global Compact - was an important contribution to the fundamental question of how to drive stakeholder capitalism. In Davos and prior to stepping down as the CEO of UN Global Compact Lise Kingo has developed and matured that plan and demonstrated how a multi stakeholder hybrid of a UN institution and a business approach can deliver extraordinary results.

In the wake of this, the UN Global Compact is determined to go all the way. In five years UN Global Compact has become one of the most attractive platforms for CEOs and C-suite executives to meet and exchange learnings and achievements within corporate sustainability. And that platform is needed more than ever. The next decade will be dominated and driven by a sustainable business mindset - reinventing what business will be all about. The business of business is sustainable business.

Business leaders and corporations around the world will be confronted with risks, challenges and possibilities of a magnitude they are not prepared or trained for. They will be forced to rethink what they learned in business schools and has experienced in their daily operations. Numerous reports and conferences have focused on the theory of sustainable leadership, but now theory is reality. And practicing sustainable leadership will provide a fundamental competitive edge and perhaps become the strongest disrupting business force in the years to come.

Transforming businesses, sectors and markets will be the corporate leadership approach to the Global Goals – and UN Global Compact is now positioned to be the leading catalyst for the transformations. Lise Kingo and her team have demonstrated what it takes to pioneer that process. It is by far no walk in the park, but a walk all corporate CEOs have to take. For Lise it has been a lifelong walk; for UN Global Compact a five years transition. But the model and recipe is now developed, which might make it easier for CEOs around the world to do it even faster. It is all a matter of mindsets - like Lise Kingo’s.
The rise of a sustainable business leader

The question remains. How did Lise do it? How do you survive as a business person in the complex, political world of the United Nations? First and foremost: She is a true hybrid who is able to combine and enhance different leadership approaches and put them into one integrated formula - thanks to her background. Her ambition and language is bold; she is not afraid to challenge status quo or to stand alone with a point of view. In modern management language we could also describe Lise’s leadership as ‘authentic’.

And Lise’s authentic leadership is what makes people walk the extra mile. Through personal presence, charm and optimism, passion and impatience, no one is left untouched by this forceful woman, who is on a mission to change the world. Every employee across the Global Compact Organization, UN Leaders, Heads of States, CEOs and decision makers from some of the world’s largest corporations are on a first name basis with Lise. Everyone knows that she is not out to further her own ambition, but that of the world and the next generation.

Lise’s mindset and approach to people and business is shaped from an early age and rooted in her studies of ancient cultures and understandings of “rites of passage” - and what drives huge transformations. That is where she really learned what true leadership is all about - and that lesson is now transformed into a sustainable leadership model. There is no easy way or silver bullet for changing a leadership model or philosophy - especially not if it challenges most of your learnings from business school and formative experiences during your career.

“Lise Kingo’s story leaves one fundamental message: sustainable leadership is more than a model, it’s a mindset. And she has succeeded in turning that mindset into a simple, strategic tool - now available for any leader, in any global company striving for being tomorrow’s frontrunner”

Lise’s story leaves one fundamental message: Sustainable leadership is more than a model, it is a mindset. And she has succeeded in turning that mindset into a simple, strategic tool for the Decade of Action – the SDG Ambition with its Implementation Model that is now available for any leader, in any global company striving for being tomorrow’s frontrunner.

That is how you make a true sustainable pioneer. And this is the true story behind it.