

The CSO at an Inflection Point: Evolving Mandate, Expanding Accountability



Table of Contents

Foreword	03
Executive Summary	04
Introduction: The CSO at an Inflection Point	05
Why This Research Matters Now	09
Methodology	10
Leadership Styles for CSO Success	11
Essential Competencies for the Modern CSO	15
Critical Knowledge Domains	18
Structural Barriers to Impact and Advancement	19
Integration, Influence, and Measurement	21
The CSO Profile: Demographics and Pathways	23
Future Outlook and Career Trajectories	24
The Future of Sustainability Leadership	26
Acknowledgements	28
References	29

Foreword



This research began with a narrower question than the one it ultimately seeks to answer.

When we first conceived the study, the goal was to explore why women hold more than two-thirds of Chief Sustainability Officer roles in the United States, a pattern documented by the Weinreb Group, and whether gendered leadership styles contributed to success in the role. The question resonated strongly with the Sustainable Brands Women's Leadership Cohort, which first came together during Climate Week 2024 and was eager to support a substantive, field-shaping project.

As the research progressed, however, that framing began to feel incomplete.

While gender clearly plays a role in how sustainability leadership is perceived and practiced, thoughtful provocation from several quarters, including male peers in my professional network and my own young adult daughter, prompted us to reassess the lens. In a period marked by heightened polarization and reflexive "us versus them" narratives, we were cautious not to reinforce divisions or typecasting through the research itself. An overly narrow focus on gender risked obscuring a more urgent question: how shifting enterprise expectations are redefining what effective CSO leadership requires, regardless of who holds the role.

At the same time, another reality became impossible to ignore. Many of the early architects of corporate sustainability are beginning to age out of leadership roles, just as the external environment has grown markedly more complex. Regulatory expansion, geopolitical volatility, economic pressure, and intensifying stakeholder

scrutiny have fundamentally reshaped the demands placed on sustainability leaders. Understanding whether the current talent pipeline is being prepared for this new reality felt both timely and necessary.

The CSO role has evolved and professionalized significantly since I first began this work at L'Oréal in 2005. What was once an emergent function is now supported by formal career paths, academic programs, and specialized executive search practices. Today's CSOs are increasingly expected to operate as enterprise leaders, navigating risk, influencing capital allocation, and integrating sustainability into core business strategy under conditions of constraint and uncertainty.

This research reflects that evolution.

Our aim is not to prescribe a single model of sustainability leadership, but to surface the leadership styles, competencies, and structural conditions that enable effectiveness today, and analyze which ones will matter most in the decade ahead. In doing so, we seek to illuminate the challenges, risks, and opportunities facing current and aspiring CSOs, and to contribute to a more intentional, future-fit approach to developing the next generation of sustainability leaders.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Pamela Gill-Alabaster'.

Pamela Gill-Alabaster

former CSO, CMO,
Adjunct Professor Columbia University

Executive Summary

This research examines what it will take for Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) to lead successfully in the next era of enterprise performance. It focuses on preparedness, specifically whether leadership styles, competencies, and structural positioning within the enterprise are evolving quickly enough to meet rising expectations for how these leaders can continue contributing to enterprise value creation.

Over the past decade, technical expertise, disclosure rigor, and purpose-driven advocacy have built and legitimized the sustainability function. In some companies, these capabilities have helped embed sustainability into core strategy. In many others, integration remains partial, concentrated in reporting, compliance, or isolated initiatives rather than fully connected to capital allocation, operating models, and commercial decision-making.

As the function matured within the enterprise, the performance standard for the role has expanded. Survey results show that CSO effectiveness is now evaluated across multiple enterprise criteria. Progress toward public targets remains foundational, but financial impact and value creation rank near the top of evaluation measures. The central shift is in how effectiveness is defined. Sustainability leadership is increasingly evaluated by its contribution to enterprise value creation and protection, including growth, cost efficiency, risk management, and capital allocation.

This expanded definition of effectiveness carries implications for the role itself. Technical sustainability expertise remains foundational, but success increasingly depends on financial fluency, commercial acumen, and the ability to connect sustainability strategy to enterprise decision-making.

Leadership style shapes whether those competencies translate into impact. The

research indicates that systems thinking, transformational, and inclusive leadership remain critical in navigating complexity and aligning diverse stakeholders. Increasingly, effective CSOs pair these traits with enterprise pragmatism, translating long-term sustainability ambition into near-term business decisions and engaging commercial and financial leaders as strategic partners.

Expanded competencies and evolved leadership approaches alone, however, do not ensure performance. The research identifies a structural imbalance in some organizations. CSOs are evaluated on enterprise outcomes such as growth, resilience, margin, innovation, and risk without corresponding authority, decision rights, or integration into the mechanisms that drive those results. In these contexts, expectations for value creation can exceed the structural authority required to deliver it.

The implications are clear. The competency profile of the role is expanding beyond technical sustainability expertise to include financial fluency and enterprise integration. Leadership approaches must combine systems thinking and inclusive influence with commercial orientation and business acumen. At the same time, enterprise design must enable performance through proximity to strategy, alignment with capital allocation, integration into operating models, and clear governance authority.

This research therefore centers on a forward-looking question: **What leadership styles, competencies, and structural positioning within the enterprise enable CSOs to lead successfully as expectations shift from target delivery to enterprise value contribution?**

The CSO at an Inflection Point



The role has become far more complex. Leaders are navigating climate impacts, social issues, labor challenges, and political pressure all at once, while boards increasingly view these as core governance and fiduciary issues.

-**Brenna Davis**, CEO,
Organically Grown Company

The Sustainability Imperative in 2025: Regulatory Gravity Meets Business Reality

Over the past decade, sustainability has shifted from a values-led, largely voluntary agenda to a core business and governance mandate. Regulatory expansion, economic volatility, and heightened stakeholder scrutiny have reshaped how companies define risk, resilience, and long-term value, and, in turn, what they now require from sustainability leadership.

Regulatory expectations have shifted markedly, with the scale and enforceability of sustainability-related requirements increasing materially. The EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), along with parallel developments in supply-chain due diligence, climate disclosure, and human rights regulation, has moved sustainability reporting into the realm of assurance-ready, legally scrutinized corporate disclosure.

This shift is no longer confined to Europe. In the U.S., state-level climate disclosure rules, emerging product stewardship and extended producer responsibility (EPR) laws, and heightened enforcement expectations are narrowing the gap between voluntary environmental, social, and governance (ESG) commitments and mandatory compliance. As a result, sustainability data must increasingly be treated with the same rigor as financial reporting, elevating enterprise risk associated with inaccuracies, omissions, or misalignment between sustainability commitments and business strategy.

Increasingly Core

At the same time, sustainability has become increasingly integrated into core business

performance. In 2025, 91% of listed companies globally disclosed sustainability-related information, and 70% had formal board oversight of climate-related risks, reflecting the extent to which sustainability is now embedded in enterprise governance rather than treated as a peripheral function (OECD).

In 2025, 70% of public companies globally had formal board oversight of climate-related risks.

Financial leadership has also moved closer to sustainability strategy. 77% of companies report that the CFO plays a leading or significant role in funding and shaping ESG and sustainability initiatives (Verdantix). Together, these shifts signal a broader transition from a primarily intent-led to an economic-driven approach, in which sustainability is evaluated through the expanded lens of capital allocation, cost discipline, risk management, regulatory readiness, and operational resilience.

Macroeconomic and geopolitical pressures have further accelerated this shift.

By the end of Q2 2025, trade and tariff volatility had already imposed more than \$35 billion in incremental costs on global companies. That pressure has persisted, with tariff-related uncertainty continuing to weigh on earnings, capital allocation, and investment planning as firms entered Q3 (Reuters). In response, companies are increasingly prioritizing supply-chain sustainability initiatives, particularly transparency into upstream inputs and greater sourcing resilience, as



The role is more complex today because sustainability must be re-articulated in terms of business fundamentals, amid regulatory change, geopolitical disruption, and growing pushback on ESG.” - **Michael Koberi**, former Board Director Bunge Global, and CSO, Starbucks

tools for managing tariff-related disruption. Ninety-four percent of companies report tariff-driven impacts across supply chains, including raw material sourcing and procurement (National Foreign Trade Council). Importantly, these initiatives are no longer viewed as purely defensive. Sixty-five percent of companies now identify sustainable supply-chain initiatives as drivers of business value, reflecting their role in risk mitigation, continuity, and margin protection (EcoVadis).

65% of companies now identify sustainable supply-chain initiatives as drivers of business value.

The Materiality of Trust

Trust has emerged as an additional, less predictable, but equally material driver. Signals heading into 2026 reinforce this shift. The 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer finds that 61% of people globally hold a moderate to high sense of grievance toward business and government. At the same time, employees place greater trust in their employers than in any other institution, at 78% globally. That trust, however, is conditional on company actions aligning with stated values, making leadership credibility and consistency core business risks. Recent market responses underscore the financial implications of these dynamics. In 2025, Target was sued by shareholders for allegedly concealing risks associated with its diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives leading to customer backlash and a significant decline in market value (Reuters). Together, these signals underscore the growing role of sustainability performance, credibility, and leadership judgment in shaping brand trust and workforce confidence, with implications

for enterprise risk.

These dynamics are unfolding amid a particularly challenging operating environment in the United States. Corporate leaders face sustained pressure to demonstrate near-term financial returns on sustainability investments, alongside growing incentives for “greenhushing” as regulatory uncertainty, political polarization, and litigation risk intensify.

Even when positions are grounded in established science, most notably on climate, executives are increasingly cautious about taking public stances that could invite scrutiny or be perceived as ideological. At the same time, the rollback of environmental protections, the withdrawal from more than 60 multilateral agreements and international organizations, and the prospect of government retaliation against companies in the U.S. viewed as politically misaligned have altered the risk calculus for corporate action (Reuters).

In this context, the effectiveness of the CSO role is shaped not only by technical expertise or formal mandate, but by leadership judgment under pressure. The ability to navigate ambiguity, maintain credibility, and integrate sustainability into business strategy has become central to maintain trust in the marketplace when external signals discourage long-term, science-based decision-making.

The Evolution of the CSO Role: A 10 Year Snapshot

Against this backdrop, the role of the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) has expanded in both prominence and scope. Over the past decade, the CSO position has shifted from an emergent, often advisory role to a recognized C-suite function with growing accountability. Among the world's largest companies, 56% of the G250 in 2024 had a dedicated C-level sustainability leader, up from 45% just two years earlier, while 46% of companies in the broader N100 group report a C-suite sustainability role (KPMG).

In the United States, the number of executives holding the title Chief Sustainability Officer has increased more than sevenfold since 2011, reflecting rising regulatory pressure, heightened stakeholder expectations, and the expanding role of sustainability in enterprise risk, governance, and strategy (Weinreb Group).

Increasingly central to the business...

Longitudinal research from Weinreb Group shows that the role has professionalized and moved closer to the center of enterprise decision-making, with CSOs increasingly involved in risk management, governance, and strategic planning. At the same time, the research highlights a persistent gap between the growing prominence of the title and the authority, resources, and cross-functional integration required for sustained impact, underscoring why leadership capability has become the defining challenge.

...yet fragmented...

However, the maturation of the role has not been linear or uniform. While more CSOs now sit at the executive table, their

mandates have grown more complex and, in some cases, more constrained. Reporting lines have increasingly shifted toward Legal, Finance, or Risk functions, reflecting heightened regulatory scrutiny and assurance expectations. In 2025, nearly 20% of CSOs reported into the legal function, roughly double the share from just two years earlier (Weinreb Group). This structural realignment reflects a heightened emphasis on compliance and controls, but it also introduces tension between long-term transformation and near-term risk management.

...and complex at the same time.

At the same time, expectations placed on CSOs have expanded beyond traditional environmental and social domains. Today's CSO is expected to manage enterprise risk, interpret geopolitical and regulatory signals, influence capital allocation, and translate sustainability performance into terms that resonate with boards, CFOs, and investors. Findings from this research indicate that 88% of respondents view the CSO role as more complex than it was three years ago, with more than half describing it as significantly more complex. The most frequently cited external pressures were regulatory and policy requirements (61%), geopolitical instability (54%), and misinformation or ESG backlash (44%). Internal barriers included persistent skepticism about financial impact, short-term performance pressures, and limited executive sponsorship.

“

When I began, there was no CSO role—sustainability sat in R&D with minimal connection to the business. Today, the CSO is a core member of the executive team, working alongside business unit and regional leaders.
- **Virginie Helias**, Chief Sustainability Officer, *Procter & Gamble*

Most frequently cited external pressures by sustainability leaders:

- **61%: regulatory and policy requirements**
- **54%: geopolitical instability**
- **44%: misinformation or ESG backlash**

A decade or more ago, sustainability leaders most often emerged from commercial roles, environmental health and safety (EH&S) or corporate social responsibility (CSR), public affairs at a time when the function itself was still taking shape and there was no established pathway to the C-suite. Operating largely without precedent or formal training, these early leaders played a formative role in advancing sustainability from CSR toward a more rigorous, science-based discipline, relying heavily on influence, coalition-building, and informal authority to navigate complex product life cycles and

value chains. Over that same time, the CSO role has started to be supported by more formalized training pathways, including graduate-level programs in sustainability management, ESG, and related disciplines.

As the role has professionalized and sustainability has become more tightly linked to enterprise risk and performance, the CSO's remit has evolved, expanding beyond programmatic and reporting responsibilities into core enterprise decision-making. Today's CSO is increasingly positioned as an integrator, operating across functions, mediating trade-offs, and aligning sustainability priorities with enterprise strategy. In practice, this places sustainability leadership within decisions related to risk management, capital allocation, and performance management, under conditions of heightened scrutiny and limited tolerance for error.



Why This Research Matters Now



My role has expanded well beyond environmental operations into grants, ESG disclosures, community outreach, and workforce education—reflecting a shift toward value creation. But in an industrial environment, the compliance burden remains both expected and challenging.”

- **Bonnie Nixon**,
ESG & Sustainability
Director, *Long Beach
Container Terminal*

Despite the increasing prominence and professionalization of the CSO role, a significant gap remains between what organizations expect sustainability leaders to deliver and how those leaders are prepared, supported, and evaluated. Much of the existing discussion continues to focus on organizational structures, reporting lines, or technical ESG expertise, without sufficient attention to the leadership styles and competencies required to succeed in the current operating environment.

At the same time, sustainability has become inseparable from enterprise risk management, financial performance, and long-term value creation. Regulatory exposure, geopolitical volatility, and heightened scrutiny from investors, employees, and customers have expanded the scope of the CSO role faster than most organizations have been able to adapt their talent models, governance frameworks, or leadership development pathways.

This research responds to that gap.

Rather than asking whether companies need sustainability leadership, it examines what type of leadership is required as sustainability becomes embedded in core business decision-making. The focus is on the leadership styles, competencies, and contextual factors that shape CSO effectiveness under conditions of complexity, constraint, and uncertainty. Moreover, the demographic and experiential profile of sustainability leaders, particularly the high representation of women in CSO roles relative to other C-suite positions, raises important questions about alignment

between leadership approaches and role demands. Understanding which leadership styles are most effective, and why, is critical to how organizations equip CSOs for success and manage the growing risks associated with sustainability leadership in today's operating environment.

If sustainability leadership is mission-critical to enterprise resilience, regulatory readiness, and long-term value creation, the professionalization of the CSO role must extend to intentional career pathing, skills development, and succession planning.

Finally, if sustainability leadership is now mission-critical to enterprise resilience, regulatory readiness, and long-term value creation, the professionalization of the CSO role cannot stop at title, mandate, or visibility. It must extend to intentional career pathing, skills development, and succession planning. Yet, many sustainability leaders continue to enter the role through nontraditional pathways, often without systematic exposure to finance, operations, capital allocation, or general management. These capabilities are increasingly required for effectiveness in the role. Without developing a future-fit bench of sustainability leaders, organizations risk reinforcing a cycle in which expectations exceed preparation and individual capability is asked to compensate for structural gaps. Ensuring that sustainability leadership is durable, scalable, and commercially integrated requires treating CSO development as a core element of enterprise talent strategy, not optional.

Methodology

This research uses a mixed-methods approach to examine both the scale of change in the Chief Sustainability Officer role and the lived experience of leaders operating within it. The study integrates quantitative survey data, qualitative interviews and questionnaires with senior sustainability leaders, and targeted input from executive recruiters, complemented by prior leadership research and market benchmarks.

Quantitative Survey

A total of 176 respondents completed the survey, including 47 Chief Sustainability Officers, alongside C-suite executives, functional leaders, and board-adjacent roles. Respondents represented a broad range of industries, company sizes, and geographies.

The online survey was distributed in September—October 2025 through Sustainable Brands and partner networks, including Leaders on Purpose, Executive Networks, and Board Intelligence. It combined scaled responses, ranking exercises, and open-ended questions to assess perceptions of role complexity, leadership styles, core competencies, organizational barriers, and future readiness of the CSO role.

Qualitative CSO Interviews and Questionnaires

To deepen and contextualize the survey findings, the research included in-depth interviews and written questionnaires with 13 current and former Chief Sustainability Officers across sectors and regions. Participants were selected to reflect variation in industry context, organizational maturity, reporting structure, and career trajectory, including rare transitions from the CSO role

into broader enterprise leadership or CEO positions.

The qualitative inquiry explored the evolution of the CSO role, sources of complexity, leadership influence, commercial fluency, board engagement, and the structural enablers and constraints shaping effectiveness. These insights illuminate how sustainability leadership is experienced in practice and how CSOs navigate trade-offs and decision-making under pressure.

Executive Recruiter Perspectives

The study also incorporated structured input from executive recruitment firm Acre, specializing in sustainability, ESG, and C-suite placement. Their perspectives focused on shifts in hiring criteria, perceived competency gaps, reporting models associated with success, gender dynamics in assessment, and barriers to CSO progression into broader enterprise leadership roles. This input provides an external market lens on how sustainability leadership is evaluated and positioned at the board and CEO level, complementing insights from the survey and CSO interviews.

Leadership Styles for CSO Success

“

I've built commercial acumen by working closely with finance and commercial teams—engaging in budget planning, evaluating P&L implications of sustainability programs, and presenting proposals focused on ROI and risk management.”
- **Kim Marotta**, Chief Environmental Sustainability Officer and Head of Enterprise Risk, *Suntory Global Spirits*

Survey results reveal a meaningful divergence between the leadership styles most closely associated with general business success and those viewed as critical to the effectiveness of Chief Sustainability Officers. While there is some overlap, the relative weighting of styles reflects fundamentally different expectations placed on sustainability leadership compared to traditional enterprise leadership roles.

Leadership styles associated with business success are dominated by commercially oriented and execution-focused traits. Commercial mindset, adaptive leadership, and transformational leadership rank highest, indicating the leadership attributes most closely associated with perceived business success.

By contrast, CSO success is most strongly associated with adaptive, transformational, and systems-thinking leadership styles, reflecting the emphasis placed on navigating

complexity, influencing without formal authority, and catalyzing change within large organizations.

The gap between the two profiles is most pronounced in perceptions of commercial mindset. While it is viewed as one of the strongest contributors to overall business success, it is ranked significantly lower as a driver of CSO success today. This disparity highlights a structural tension: **CSOs are expected to influence enterprise value creation yet are not consistently evaluated or supported through the same commercially grounded leadership lens applied to other C-suite roles.**

Together, these findings suggest that sustainability leadership today is rewarded for enabling transformation and managing complexity but remains partially decoupled from the commercial and financial leadership norms that define broader business success.



Table 1. Leadership Style Rankings: Business Success vs. CSO Success

	CONTRIBUTES MOST TO BUSINESS SUCCESS	CONTRIBUTES TO MOST THE SUCCESS OF A CHIEF SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER (CSO)	TOTAL RESPONDENTS
Transformational (inspiring change, vision-driven)	61.07% 80	70.99% 93	131
Inclusive (collaborative, participatory decision-making)	56.36% 62	64.55% 71	110
Systems thinking (understanding interdependence and complexity)	65.25% 92	68.79% 97	141
Creative/Innovative (problem-solving with originality)	56.70% 55	62.89% 61	97
Transactional (goal-focused, performance-managed)	68.82% 64	44.09% 41	93
Radical/Disruptive (challenging status quo, activist mindset)	44.68% 21	61.70% 29	47
Servant (ethical/values-based, focused on empowering others and purpose)	51.19% 43	69.05% 58	84
Empathic (emotional intelligence and empathy to build trust)	53.45% 31	70.69% 41	58
Laissez-Faire (minimal supervision, high autonomy)	50.00% 11	63.64% 14	22
Autocratic (makes all decisions, with minimal input from others)	57.89% 11	42.11% 8	19
Adaptive (flexible, responsive, learning-oriented)	60.00% 60	65.00% 65	100
Commercially minded (profit maximization)	83.87% 78	38.71% 36	93

Q1 In your view, which of the following leadership styles contribute most to business success and to the success of the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO)? (Select 3 for each column)



To be most effective, sustainability is not something we do on the side. We can build more durable businesses when we align sustainability and commercial initiatives — realistic about and focused on the interests of our customers, our business drivers, and long-term value.”

- **Diana Birkett**

Rakow, CEO

Hawaiian Airlines

Future Focus: What's Needed for Tomorrow

Looking ahead, the leadership styles required for CSO effectiveness are expected to shift as sustainability becomes more deeply embedded in enterprise strategy, capital allocation, and operating decisions. While many of the styles associated with CSO success today remain relevant, their relative importance is changing as the role moves toward value creation under constraint.

A Clear Reordering of Leadership Styles

Survey results suggest a clear reordering of leadership styles required to navigate future sustainability challenges, reflecting the increasing complexity, interdependence, and economic stakes facing organizations.

First, systems thinking leadership becomes foundational.

Future CSO effectiveness depends on the ability to understand how different systems interact, including supply chains, policy and regulatory environments, capital markets, ecosystems, and social institutions. This includes recognizing key actors within those systems, identifying leverage points for change, and anticipating downstream and cascading impacts. As sustainability challenges become more interconnected, systems thinking shifts from a differentiator to a core leadership requirement.

Second, transformational leadership remains central but evolves in form.

Future CSOs are expected to operate as visionary change agents and catalysts, capable of mobilizing organizations around long-term goals while navigating resistance, trade-offs, and uncertainty. Transformation increasingly depends on sustaining momentum across functions and over some time, rather than simply initiating change.

Third, commercially minded leadership gains prominence.

As sustainability becomes more directly tied to enterprise resilience, cost structures, and value creation, leadership styles grounded in commercial understanding and financial context increase in importance. The future CSO is expected to engage credibly in discussions of capital investment, P&L implications, cost trade-offs, and performance management, not as a replacement for systems or transformational leadership, but as a complement that enables sustained impact.

Together, these changes show that sustainability leaders are shifting from roles focused on coordination and influence on roles that can work across entire systems, drive change, and engage directly in commercial decisions amid complexity and constraints.

Table 2: Leadership Styles - Current vs. Future Importance

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONDENTS
Transformational (inspiring change, vision-driven)	52.47%	85
Inclusive (collaborative, participatory decision-making)	29.63%	48
Systems thinking (understanding interdependence and complexity)	65.43%	106
Creative/Innovative (problem-solving with originality)	29.63%	48
Servant (ethical/values-based focused on empowering others and purpose)	11.73%	19
Transactional (goal-focused, performance-managed)	11.73%	19
Radical/Disruptive (challenging status quo, activist mindset)	8.64%	14
Empathic (emotional intelligence and empathy to build trust)	12.35%	20
Laissez-Faire (minimal supervision, high autonomy)	0.00%	0
Autocratic (makes all decisions, with minimal input from others)	0.62%	1
Adaptive (flexible, responsive, learning-oriented)	29.01%	47
Commercially minded (profit maximization)	38.27%	62
Total Respondents		162

Q11 Thinking about the next decade, what leadership styles will be most important for navigating sustainability challenges?
(Select up to 3)

GENDER AND LEADERSHIP STYLES

More than 60% of survey respondents believe that gender is a factor in CSO leadership and success. Survey findings highlight differences in how leadership styles are perceived across sustainability and business leadership contexts. Several leadership styles more commonly associated with women CSOs align with those viewed as essential for CSO success, while styles associated with men are more often linked to perceptions of business leadership. These dynamics are explored further in *The CSO Profile: Demographics and Pathways*.

Essential Competencies for the Modern CSO



One of the most consistent gaps we see in CSO candidates is direct P&L experience. As margins tighten, companies are looking for sustainability leaders who can articulate the business case, engage credibly with finance and investor relations, and operate with a stronger commercial lens.”
- **Catherine Harris**,
Executive Director,
Acre

While leadership style might shape how CSOs operate, effectiveness increasingly depends on a distinct and evolving set of competencies. Survey results show a clear shift in what is required to succeed in the role today versus what will be required to navigate the next decade, reflecting the growing integration of sustainability into enterprise strategy, risk management, and performance. Across both current and future views, respondents consistently prioritize competencies that enable CSOs to operate at the enterprise level rather than as functional specialists.

Core Competencies: Current Effectiveness vs. Future Needs

Survey responses indicate that strategic foresight, long-term vision, systems thinking, and complexity management, rank as the most critical competencies for CSO effectiveness today and — the ones expected to grow further in importance over the next decade. These competencies reflect the need to anticipate emerging risks, understand interdependencies across value chains and markets, and navigate trade-offs under uncertainty.

Top competencies for CSO success

- **Strategic foresight**
- **Long-term vision**
- **Systems thinking**

By contrast, technical sustainability expertise, while foundational, ranks below strategic and systems-oriented capabilities. This pattern reinforces the continued shift away from viewing the CSO primarily as a technical expert and toward expectations of enterprise-level leadership and integration. Capabilities related to technology, data,

and analytics literacy, including AI literacy and responsible use, increase in importance in future-oriented responses, reflecting the growing role of sustainability data in decision-making and assurance.

Beyond technical and strategic domains, respondents emphasize the importance of influencing and cross-functional collaboration, cited by more than half of respondents as critical to current effectiveness. As CSOs continue to operate without direct authority over many levers of change, the ability to influence across functions, sectors, and stakeholder groups remains central. Competencies related to communication and storytelling, emotional intelligence and empathy, and executive presence further reinforce the relational and integrative nature of the role.

Strategic and Business Acumen

CSOs are also increasingly expected to engage credibly in core business discussions as sustainability becomes more tightly linked to enterprise resilience, cost structures, and long-term value creation. Respondents consistently point to the ability to understand capital allocation decisions, ROI thresholds, product cost structures, and P&L implications as essential for sustained influence. Fluency in these areas enables CSOs to assess trade-offs, prioritize initiatives, and translate sustainability strategies into terms that resonate with CFOs, boards, and business unit leaders. This also includes familiarity with green financing mechanisms and how sustainability performance interacts with capital markets and financing conditions.

Table 3. Top 10 Competencies for Current CSO Effectiveness

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONDENTS	
Technical sustainability expertise (Technical & Analytical)	22.73%	40
Technology, data & analytics literacy (Technical & Analytical)	7.95%	14
AI literacy & responsible use (Technical & Analytical)	4.55%	8
Strategic foresight & long-term vision (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	55.11%	97
Systems thinking & ability to manage complexity (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	65.34%	115
Risk management (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	14.77%	26
Regulatory & policy acumen (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	11.36%	20
Courageous, values-driven leadership (Values & Character)	28.98%	51
Moral clarity & integrity (Values & Character)	14.77%	26
Resilience under uncertainty (Values & Character)	28.98%	51
Emotional intelligence & empathy (Interpersonal & Influence)	15.34%	27
Influencing, cross functional & sector collaboration (Interpersonal & Influence)	52.84%	93
Communication & storytelling (Interpersonal & Influence)	26.14%	46
Executive presence (Interpersonal & Influence)	23.86%	42
Operational execution & process discipline (Execution & Business Acumen)	11.36%	20
Business & financial acumen (Execution & Business Acumen)	30.11%	53
Results orientation/accountability (Execution & Business Acumen)	22.73%	40
Innovation & creativity (Innovation & Problem Solving)	11.93%	21
Learning agility & growth mindset (Innovation & Problem Solving)	15.34%	27
Problem solving & negotiation/conflict management (Innovation & Problem Solving)	14.77%	26
Other (please specify)	2.27%	4
Total Respondents		176

Q2 Which competencies do you believe are most critical for CSO effectiveness? (Select up to 5)

The interviews we conducted reinforce this perspective. Many CSOs note that while technical expertise helped them get the role, commercial and financial experience now determines a seat at the decision-making tables and credibility at the executive level. This gap highlights a recurring challenge: **financial and commercial exposure is often developed on the job rather than through intentional career pathing.**

Across survey results, interviews, and open-ended responses, these findings suggest that future CSO effectiveness depends not only on being able to demonstrate systems thinking and cross functional influence, but also on the ability to integrate sustainability into the economic logic of the business—linking strategy, investment, and performance in ways that support durable value creation.

Table 4. Top 10 Competencies for Navigating Future Sustainability Challenges

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONDENTS
Technical sustainability expertise (Technical & Analytical)	22.22%	36
Technology, data & analytics literacy (Technical & Analytical)	14.20%	23
AI literacy & responsible use (Technical & Analytical)	24.69%	40
Strategic foresight & long-term vision (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	46.91%	76
Systems thinking & ability to manage complexity (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	58.64%	95
Risk management (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	23.46%	38
Regulatory & policy acumen (Strategic & Systems Thinking)	20.99%	34
Courageous, values-driven leadership (Values & Character)	25.31%	41
Moral clarity & integrity (Values & Character)	12.35%	20
Resilience under uncertainty (Values & Character)	26.54%	43
Emotional intelligence & empathy (Interpersonal & Influence)	10.49%	17
Influencing, cross functional & sector collaboration (Interpersonal & Influence)	42.59%	69
Communication & storytelling (Interpersonal & Influence)	20.99%	34
Executive presence (Interpersonal & Influence)	15.43%	25
Operational execution & process discipline (Execution & Business Acumen)	9.88%	16
Business & financial acumen (Execution & Business Acumen)	27.78%	45
Results orientation/accountability (Execution & Business Acumen)	18.52%	30
Innovation & creativity (Innovation & Problem Solving)	8.02%	13
Learning agility & growth mindset (Innovation & Problem Solving)	8.64%	14
Problem solving & negotiation/conflict management (Innovation & Problem Solving)	9.26%	15
Other (please specify)	1.23%	2
Total Respondents		162

Q12 Again, thinking about the next decade, what competencies will be most important for navigating sustainability challenges? (Select up to 5)

Critical Knowledge Domains



The knowledge requirements change by industry and over time. Regulatory exposure, supply-chain risk, and stakeholder pressure all shape what sustainability leaders need to understand deeply.” - **Helen Sahi**, CSO, *Bic*

While competencies describe how CSOs lead, effectiveness also depends on experience or what they know. Survey responses highlight a set of technical and contextual knowledge domains that CSOs currently draw on to navigate sustainability challenges. Unlike leadership styles or competencies, these domains reflect what sustainability leaders must understand in depth to exercise sound judgment and maintain credibility across enterprise decisions.

Across industries, respondents consistently prioritize knowledge related to climate science, corporate governance and regulatory trends, sustainable operations, supply chains, and stakeholder engagement, though the relative importance of each varies by sector.

Climate science emerges as a top-ranked knowledge domain, particularly in industries exposed to physical climate risk, transition pressures, or complex Scope 3 emissions profiles. Respondents emphasize the need to understand not only emissions and targets, but also the business implications of climate impacts, transition pathways, and scenario-based risk.

Corporate governance, enterprise risk, and regulatory trends rank highly across sectors, reflecting the expanding scope of disclosure requirements, enforcement expectations, and board-level accountability. Knowledge in this area supports informed decision-making and effective engagement with legal, finance, and risk functions.

Sustainable operations, including water stewardship and waste management, are especially salient in resource-intensive

industries, where operational performance directly affects cost, resilience, and regulatory exposure.

Sustainable supply chains and procurement also feature prominently, driven by growing expectations around due diligence, traceability, and vendor governance. In manufacturing, consumer goods, and technology sectors, supply-chain knowledge is closely tied to continuity, compliance, and brand trust.

Finally, **stakeholder engagement** remains a critical knowledge domain, particularly in highly visible or regulated industries. Respondents point to the importance of understanding the expectations, influence, and dynamics of multiple audience groups, from customers and employees to investors, regulators, and communities.

As if that wasn't already an incredibly complex mix of competencies and skill sets, respondents also reference a broader set of contextual knowledge domains, including biodiversity and nature, human rights and labor practices, AI ethics and digital responsibility, and innovation and circularity, that can help inform decision-making depending on industry exposure and strategic focus.

Across industries and risk profiles, these findings suggest that the CSO knowledge base is not static or universal, but situational and shaped by industry exposure and material risk, requiring leaders to develop depth where risk and impact are most material rather than breadth across all domains.

Structural Barriers to Impact and Advancement

Table 5. Top Barriers to CSO Effectiveness

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONDENTS	
Limited executive support or strategic visibility (e.g., lack of sponsorship, roles seen as non-strategic)	63.07%	111
Bias toward traditional skills over sustainability leadership (e.g., undervaluing collaboration, favoring technical/business norms)	27.84%	49
Perceptions of weak financial or commercial impact (e.g., ROI doubts, financial acumen concerns)	74.43%	131
Short-term pressures overriding long-term ESG goals	71.02%	125
Unclear ownership or fragmented accountability	40.91%	72
Insufficient resources or operational support	51.70%	91
Cultural or political resistance to change	51.14%	90
Other (please specify)	11.36%	20
Total Respondents		176

Q4 What do you think most impedes sustainability leadership success today? (Select all the copy)

“The CSO role is far more complex than it was even four or five years ago. To be effective today, you need a much deeper understanding of the business—climate, data, human capital, and change management—while managing future risk and helping unlock enterprise value.”
- **Dave Stangis**, former CSO, Apollo Global Management

Structural Barriers to Impact and Advancement

Despite the elevated profile of the CSO role and rising expectations for sustainability leadership, survey results point to persistent structural and organizational barriers that constrain both impact and career progression. These barriers are not technical in nature; rather, they reflect tensions between short-term business pressures, organizational incentives, and the evolving scope of the role.

Barriers to Sustainability Leadership Effectiveness

Survey responses highlight a set of systemic impediments that limit sustainability leadership impact, even in organizations that have formally elevated the role. The most significant barrier is the **perception that sustainability lacks clear financial or commercial impact**, cited by nearly three-quarters of respondents (74%). Despite evidence linking sustainability to risk mitigation and resilience, many CSOs

report that their initiatives continue to be evaluated through a narrow cost lens rather than integrated into broader value-creation frameworks.

Closely following is **short-term performance pressure overriding long-term sustainability goals** (71%), reflecting a misalignment between enterprise incentive structures and the time horizons required to deliver sustainability outcomes. **Limited executive support** also emerges as a significant constraint. Respondents point to inconsistent sponsorship across the C-suite, where sustainability is often endorsed in principle but deprioritized in practice when trade-offs arise.

Finally, insufficient resources and cultural or political resistance further constrain effectiveness. These factors are particularly acute in organizations operating in polarized environments or navigating cost pressure, where sustainability leadership may be viewed as discretionary rather than strategically essential.

Table 6. Barriers to CSO Career Advancement

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONDENTS	
Perception of CSO as a specialist role rather than enterprise leadership	82.39%	145
Lack of direct P&L responsibility	55.68%	98
Limited exposure to investors and capital markets	17.61%	31
Board bias toward traditional career pathways	57.39%	101
Insufficient sponsorship or advocacy from senior leadership	26.70%	47
Short tenure or high turnover in CSO positions	5.11%	9
Other (please specify)	6.25%	11
Total Respondents		176

Q5 What are the most significant barriers to CSOs advancing into CEO or other enterprise leadership roles? (Select up to 3)



The financial acumen expectation is more elevated than ever before, and the expectation on delivering short-term value is heightened. This requires more adept and adaptable management style in order to influence stakeholders towards outcomes.” - **Sophie Beckham**, CSO, *International Paper*

Roadblocks to Career Advancement

Beyond immediate impact, survey responses reveal structural barriers that limit CSO progression into broader enterprise leadership roles. Survey responses indicate that the most significant obstacle is the perception of the CSO as a functional specialist rather than an enterprise leader.

Respondents also cite board preference for traditional career pathways, particularly those rooted in finance, operations, or general management, as a major constraint. This bias reinforces a narrow view of leadership readiness that undervalues the complexity and enterprise exposure inherent in modern sustainability roles.

The lack of direct P&L responsibility further compounds these challenges. Even as CSOs influence capital allocation, cost structures, and risk decisions, the absence of formal line accountability continues to limit advancement opportunities relative to peers in other C-suite functions.

Complexity as a Structural Constraint

Nearly 9 in 10 respondents report that the CSO role has become more complex over the past three years, reflecting the convergence of regulatory expansion, geopolitical volatility, and heightened public scrutiny. Together, these forces compress decision timelines and raise the consequences of missteps. Importantly, this complexity has expanded the scope of sustainability leadership without a corresponding increase in authority, resources, or clarity of mandate. As a result, CSOs are increasingly asked to manage enterprise and reputational risk in operating environments defined by uncertainty and constraint.

These findings suggest that the barriers facing sustainability leaders are less about individual capability and more about organizational design and external context, underscoring the need for stronger alignment between sustainability ambition, leadership expectations, and enterprise governance.

Integration, Influence, and Measurement

Table 7. Integration Levels Across Organizations

ANSWER CHOICES		RESPONDENTS
Fully embedded (Sustainability is consistently considered across all major business decisions, functions, and strategic planning processes)	27.16%	44
Partially integrated/integrated in some functions (Sustainability is embedded in some functions or initiatives, but not enterprise-wide)	44.44%	72
Limited integration (Sustainability is treated as a separate program or team with limited influence on core business decisions)	26.54%	43
Not yet integrated (Sustainability is not currently factored into business decision-making)	1.85%	3
Total		162

Q10 How well integrated is sustainability into business decision-making at your organization?

“A part of my role is advancing a different narrative—one that directly connects sustainability to economics, opportunity, and risk. For example, making the case for renewables has become less about advancing a cause and more a discussion about client demand, energy security, and economics.” - **Val Smith**, CSO, Citi

As sustainability becomes more closely tied to enterprise risk and long-term value, the effectiveness of the CSO role increasingly depends on the degree to which it is integrated into core business decision-making and how leadership success is measured. Survey results point to uneven progress on both dimensions.

Strategic Integration

Survey responses indicate that formal inclusion does not consistently translate into strategic influence. Only 25% of respondents report that the CSO has significant influence over corporate strategy, and just 27% describe sustainability as fully embedded in enterprise strategy and operating decisions. In most organizations, sustainability informs strategy in principle but does not reliably shape capital allocation, operating priorities, or performance management. This gap reflects a combination of structural and cultural constraints, including limited decision rights and short-term performance pressures.

Measuring Success

Survey results show that CSO performance is measured through multiple enterprise criteria, with progress toward targets most prominent, followed by financial impact and value creation, and compliance and disclosure. In organizations where sustainability is only partially integrated, this creates a misalignment when CSOs are assessed on financial outcomes without the authority, decision rights, or strategic influence typically required to deliver those results.

Table 8. Measuring Sustainability Leadership Success

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONDENTS	
Performance toward targets (GHG emissions reduction, waste diversion rates, % sustainable or certified materials) (Performance & Compliance)	68.99%	109
Compliance & disclosure (CSRD, ISSB, regulatory alignment and completeness, % of external KPIs externally assured, fines or violations related to environmental/social issues) (Performance & Compliance)	44.94%	71
Innovation & product impact (% of revenue from products with sustainability benefits, number of eco-designed or circularity products launched, LCA or eco-design product ratings) (Performance & Compliance)	34.81%	55
Financial impact & value creation (cost savings/avoidance, revenue from sustainable products, ROI on ESG investments, sustainability impact on product gross profit) (Financial & Risk Management)	50.00%	79
Risk reduction & resilience (inclusion of ESG risks in enterprise risk management (ERM), supply chain disruptions, business continuity tied to climate, insurance premium reduction tied to ESG performance) (Financial & Risk Management)	41.14%	65
Employee engagement & culture (employee engagement survey results, ESG KPIs in performance reviews, % employees trained on ESG) (People & Culture)	33.54%	53
Organizational integration (ESG KPIs in executive compensation, board oversight of ESG strategy, cross-functional ESG steering committees, % of capital projects subject to ESG screening) (People & Culture)	24.05%	38
Reputation & stakeholder trust (ESG ratings, NGO and media sentiment, brand trust and reputation scores, investor surveys)	41.77%	66
Other (please specify)	4.43%	7
Total Respondents		158

Q5 What are the most significant barriers to CSOs advancing into CEO or other enterprise leadership roles? (Select up to 3)

Implications

These findings point to a disconnect between expectations and enablement. CSOs are increasingly associated with enterprise-level outcomes yet often lack commensurate authority, decision rights, or strategic influence, particularly where sustainability is only partially integrated and

financial outcomes are used as performance measures. Without greater alignment between integration, decision rights, and performance measurement, sustainability leadership risks being held responsible for outcomes it is not structurally positioned to deliver.

The CSO Profile: Demographics and Pathways

Table 9. Gender Influences on Leadership

ANSWER CHOICES	MORE OFTEN WOMEN	MORE OFTEN MEN	EQUALLY BOTH WOMEN AND MEN	TOTAL
Transformational (inspiring change, vision-driven)	17.22% 26	13.91% 21	68.87% 104	151
Inclusive (collaborative, participatory decision-making)	78.29% 119	0.66% 1	21.05% 32	152
Systems thinking (understanding interdependence and complexity)	20.13% 30	16.11% 24	63.76% 95	149
Creative/Innovative (problem-solving with originality)	29.80% 45	5.30% 8	64.90% 98	151
Servant (ethical/values-based, focused on empowering others and purpose)	54.67% 82	3.33% 5	42.00% 63	150
Transactional (goal-focused, performance-managed)	3.38% 5	56.08% 83	40.54% 60	148
Radical/Disruptive (challenging status quo, activist mindset)	12.24% 18	30.61% 45	57.14% 84	147
Empathic (emotional intelligence and empathy to build trust)	69.80% 104	0.67% 1	29.53% 44	149
Laissez-Faire (minimal supervision, high autonomy)	8.51% 12	33.33% 47	58.16% 82	141
Autocratic (makes all decisions, with minimal input from others)	2.08% 3	59.03% 85	38.89% 56	144
Commercially minded (profit maximization)	0.67% 1	43.62% 65	55.70% 83	149

Q14 In your experience, which of the following leadership styles do you observe, more often in women CSOs, more often in men CSOs, equally in both women and men CSOs? (Check all that apply)

Survey respondents to this study were predominantly women (67%). This distribution is consistent with external analyses, including Weinreb Group research on U.S.-based Chief Sustainability Officers, which similarly indicates that women comprise a majority of individuals holding the CSO title. While these findings suggest a notable pattern, they do not represent a comprehensive or definitive view of the global CSO population.

Beyond representation, the data provides insight into how leadership styles are perceived through a gendered lens. Survey responses indicate that leadership approaches more frequently attributed to

women align closely with those identified as critical for CSO effectiveness, particularly in areas such as systems thinking, adaptive leadership, and transformational leadership. At the same time, women are less frequently perceived as commercially minded or outcome-oriented than their male counterparts. As sustainability leadership becomes more focused on commercial results, women may face structural disadvantages in how their effectiveness and potential are judged. This also suggests a mismatch between the skills organizations now expect from CSOs and how those skills are interpreted and valued, with gender influencing those perceptions.

Future Outlook and Career Trajectories



In my experience, the presence of a strong executive champion for sustainability is an important factor to shape strategic influence. That champion can be a Board member, an executive leader or executive influencer. CSOs need to think beyond three-year business planning cycles to address future risks and explore opportunities and then share insights with executive leadership on a regular basis”
- Jaycee Pribulsky,
 Partner and CSO,
Apollo Global Management

As the CSO role continues to evolve, survey responses provide insight into what draws leaders into sustainability leadership, how they view the role within a broader career arc, and whether organizations are investing in the next generation of sustainability leaders.

What Draws Leaders to Sustainability Leadership

CSOs are motivated primarily by personal values and a sense of purpose, according to respondents. Many also cite the opportunity to drive meaningful change, reinforcing the role’s appeal to leaders seeking impact beyond traditional functional boundaries.

At the same time, fewer respondents cite intrinsic interest in environmental or social issues alone, suggesting that the role increasingly attracts leaders motivated by the intersection of purpose, influence, and enterprise impact rather than just advocacy or subject-matter passion in isolation.

What Comes After the CSO Role

At the same time, survey responses suggest that CSOs do not view the role as a uniform endpoint. The most frequently cited next step is board service, reflecting interest in continued and broader governance influence and strategic oversight. A smaller percentage anticipate transitions into advisory or consulting roles, while more than a quarter view the CSO position as their final executive role.

These responses point to an uncertain and still-forming career trajectory for CSOs—one that lacks clearly defined, strategically structured pathways. The role remains inherently non-linear, without a traditional progression model or established ladder. While some of them see sustainability leadership as a pathway to broader enterprise or governance roles, others experience the role as highly demanding and potentially limiting in terms of upward mobility, consistent with the advancement barriers identified earlier in the report.

Table 10. Career Aspirations of Sustainability Leaders

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONDENTS	
CEO	6.52%	3
COO	2.17%	1
Board director (public, private, or nonprofit)	32.61%	15
Senior advisory or consulting role	17.39%	8
I see CSO as my final executive role	28.26%	13
Other (please specify)	13.04%	6
Total		46

Q36 Thinking about your own career, which of the following roles do you see as your next potential step after serving as a CSO (or equivalent role)? (Select your top choice)



It has been critical at my career junctures to have leaders who were willing to take a chance on me—to see beyond my title or current roles and see the potential for expansion, growth, and contribution in new and broader areas.”- **Diana Birkett Rakow**, CEO *Hawaiian Airlines*

Building the Next Generation of Sustainability Leaders

Despite growing recognition of the CSO role’s importance, responses indicate that organizational investment in sustainability leadership development remains insufficient. Fewer than half of respondents report that their organizations have comprehensive, or even partial, initiatives in place to build sustainability leadership capabilities.

Fewer than half of respondents report that their organizations have comprehensive, or even partial, initiatives in place to build sustainability leadership capabilities.

This gap suggests that many organizations continue to rely on individual resilience and on-the-job learning rather than intentional

talent development. As sustainability leadership becomes increasingly central to enterprise risk, strategy, and performance, the absence of structured development pathways raises questions about the continued durability and scalability of the function.

Looking Ahead

These findings suggest that while sustainability leadership continues to attract purpose-driven, impact-oriented leaders, the long-term viability of the role will depend on developing clearer career pathways and stronger organizational investment in leadership development. Without deliberate efforts to prepare and advance future CSOs, organizations risk reinforcing a cycle in which expectations continue to rise faster than readiness.



From Sustainability Leader to Enterprise Leader: Implications and the Path Forward



One of the biggest advantages I had coming into the role was knowing the business. I was able to work directly with peers on integrating sustainability into all aspects of the business. I could speak their language, and I understood what it took to make the changes we needed. — **Kristen Siemen**, Former CSO, General Motors

This research shows that the Chief Sustainability Officer role has reached an inflection point. Sustainability leadership is no longer defined primarily by technical expertise, reporting, or stakeholder engagement. CSOs are increasingly expected to operate as enterprise leaders, shaping strategy, managing risk, influencing capital allocation, and guiding organizations through heightened complexity and constraint.

Across leadership styles, competencies, knowledge domains, and career pathways, a consistent pattern emerges: **expectations for sustainability leadership have expanded faster than the systems used to prepare, enable, and evaluate those leaders.** The result is a role that is both elevated and constrained—highly visible and accountable for enterprise-level outcomes, yet often operating without commensurate authority, preparation, or a clearly defined enterprise mandate. Addressing this gap requires intentional change across organizations, individuals, and the broader talent ecosystem.

The CSO has evolved into a role that is both elevated and constrained—highly visible and accountable for enterprise-level outcomes, yet often operating without commensurate authority, preparation, or a clearly defined enterprise mandate.

Organizations Must Align Authority with Expectations

For organizations, the findings point to a need to rethink the design and positioning of the CSO role. Sustainability leadership can no longer function as a specialized capability

adjacent to the business. CSOs must be positioned as integrators across strategy, risk, finance, operations, and governance. This shift requires aligning expectations with enablement. Decision rights, reporting structures, and performance metrics must reflect the enterprise scope of the role. Organizations must address the gap between sustainability ambition and commercial integration by ensuring CSOs are equipped and empowered to engage in discussions around capital allocation, P&L trade-offs, and long-term value creation.

Equally important is the creation of credible advancement pathways. If sustainability leadership is truly critical to enterprise success, pathways to general management, CEO, and board roles cannot remain the exception. Organizations that invest in sponsorship, stretch roles, and cross-functional exposure will be better positioned to develop leaders capable of navigating the next phase of transformation catalyzed by sustainability-minded leadership.

Current and Aspiring CSOs Must Seek Enterprise Fluency

For current and aspiring CSOs, the research underscores a shift in what drives credibility and influence. While systems thinking, adaptive leadership, and the ability to navigate complexity remain essential, these capabilities are increasingly necessary but no longer sufficient.

What differentiates future-ready CSOs is enterprise fluency across multiple functions, not finance alone. While financial acumen, capital allocation, and performance management are critical, they must sit alongside fluency in innovation, brand-building, communications, operations, and



Core leadership skills are more critical than technical skills for a CSO — I've observed deep technical experts who are brilliant yet can't navigate the people, politics or team dynamics and they don't last or are relegated to technical or watchdog role." - **Daniella Foster**, Senior Vice President & Global Head, Public Affairs, Market Access & Sustainability, Bayer

risk. The most effective CSOs are those who can move seamlessly between value creation, cultural context, and strategic execution, translating sustainability priorities into terms that resonate with diverse decision-makers across the organization.

Equally important is the ability to lead without formal authority. This requires more than technical expertise; it depends on a deep understanding of organizational culture, power dynamics, and how decisions are made. As a result, CSOs with long-standing institutional knowledge, or those who invest intentionally in learning the company's informal systems, often have an advantage in building trust, navigating trade-offs, and sustaining influence over time.

Navigating trade-offs, building coalitions, and maintaining credibility under scrutiny remain defining features of sustainability leadership.

Executive Search Must Evolve Their Assessment Criteria

The findings also carry implications for executive search and leadership development. As expectations for the CSO role evolve, assessment criteria must extend beyond sustainability expertise alone. Organizations and recruiters increasingly need to evaluate candidates based on enterprise exposure, judgment under pressure, and the ability to operate across functions and time horizons. This includes

reassessing how commercial orientation and leadership readiness are interpreted, particularly given evidence that perceptions of leadership effectiveness may not always align with the attributes required for sustainability success.

Building a future-fit pipeline of sustainability leaders will require more deliberate career pathing, earlier exposure to business and financial roles, and evaluation frameworks that reflect the hybrid nature of the CSO role.

The Path Forward

Taken together, this research points to a central conclusion: **the future of sustainability leadership will be determined less by intent than by design.** Titles and mandates are no longer sufficient. Professionalization of the CSO role must extend to preparation, enablement, and succession.

As sustainability becomes inseparable from enterprise resilience, regulatory readiness, and long-term value creation, the CSO role is evolving into a test case for modern leadership itself. Organizations that treat sustainability leadership as a core element of enterprise talent strategy will be better positioned to navigate complexity, manage risk, and unlock durable value in the decade ahead.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to extend special thanks to Sustainable Brands and their Sustainable Brands Women's Leadership Cohort, whose partnership, engagement and participation helped shape both the depth and perspective of this research. Further, this research would not have been possible without the generous participation, collaboration, and support of a broad community of sustainability and business leaders, including our distribution partners, Leaders on Purpose, Board Intelligence, and Executive Networks Inc. We recognize and thank them for their ongoing commitment to advancing the practice of enterprise sustainability leadership.

We are especially indebted to the Chief Sustainability Officers and CEOs who contributed their time, insight, and candor through interviews and questionnaires. In alphabetical order: Sophie Beckham, Brenna Davis, Daniella Foster, Catherine Harris, Virginia Helias, Michael Koberi, Kim Marotta, Bonnie Nixon, Jaycee Pribulsky, Helen Sahi, Valerie (Cook) Smith, Dave Stangis, and Diana Birkett Rakow.

Finally, we offer our sincere thanks to Ineke Conway for her SurveyMonkey skills, Mark Lee, Chris Coulter, Mike Dupee for their guidance and perspective and to Aman Singh and KoAnn Skrzyniarz for their sustained support throughout the development of this research.



In Partnership with Sustainable Brands

Sustainable Brands, a Public Benefit Corporation, is the premier global community of brand innovators who are reshaping the future of commerce worldwide. Since 2006, our mission has been to inspire, engage and equip today's business and brand leaders to prosper for the near and long term by leading the way to the future we want for all people for all time. Digitally published news articles and issues-focused conversations, a robust e-learning library and internationally known conferences and regional events, along with peer-to-peer membership groups, unique market intelligence, tools and services all facilitate community education and transformative action throughout the year. SB convenes the SB Women's Leadership Cohort where the idea for this research was born.

About our Distribution Partners



Board Intelligence

Board Intelligence is EMEA's largest board technology and advisory firm. Trusted by more than 80,000 leaders across the Fortune 500, FTSE 100, and OMX 30, Board Intelligence supercharges boards with the science of board effectiveness. Through a suite of AI-powered software tools and services that distil twenty years of boardroom experience, Board Intelligence improves the efficiency of board processes and the effectiveness of boards — giving governance teams time back and enhancing the board's impact on organisational performance.



Executive Networks Inc.

For nearly two decades, Executive Networks has partnered with CHROs and senior HR leadership teams from the world's largest organizations to elevate the strategic impact of Human Resources. We understand that HR is the linchpin of organizational performance, driving critical outcomes across the business landscape. Our unique approach combines deep personal connections within our communities of practice with cutting-edge business intelligence, enabling HR leaders to thrive in an increasingly complex and fast-evolving environment. As the landscape continues to be reshaped by accelerated advances in AI and digital transformation, we deliver innovative, personalized, and just-in-time solutions that empower HR teams to optimize their impact and drive future performance. We serve CHROs and senior HR leaders in Global 1000 companies across the US, Europe, and Asia, helping them navigate the complexities of today's business world with confidence and clarity. Where HR comes to grow and lead—unlock the full potential of your HR team and organization with us.



Leaders on Purpose

Leaders on Purpose is the premier global platform helping corporate leaders drive sustainable growth and catalyze innovation for the next generation of businesses. We guide organizations in transforming their strategies to address critical global challenges while meeting the evolving expectations of stakeholders and achieving measurable impact.

Born from a collaboration between leaders from Harvard University, Unilever, The World Bank, and The London School of Economics, we've evolved into an independent, for-benefit organization bridging the CEO agenda with the global agenda. We address the critical knowledge gap and break down the isolation often faced by businesses, helping them leverage collective genius and collaborative innovation for lower-cost, systemic solutions.

References

OECD. (2025). Climate governance and corporate oversight: 2025 edition.

https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/10/oecd-corporate-governance-factbook-2025_56febc0d/full-report.html

Beyond the bottom line: The CFO's role in sustainability

<https://www.verdantix.com/insights/blog/beyond-the-bottom-line-the-cfo-s-role-in-sustainability>

Reuters. (2026, January 26). Tariffs linger over earnings even as companies get used to them. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/sustainable-finance-reporting/tariffs-linger-over-earnings-even-companies-get-used-them-2026-01-26/>

National Foreign Trade Council. (2024). Tariffs and the U.S. supply chain: Business impacts and policy implications. <https://www.nftc.org/reports/tariffs-and-the-u-s-supply-chain/>

EcoVadis. (2024). Sustainable procurement barometer 2024: From compliance to value creation. <https://dkflato8y5dsg.cloudfront.net/uploads/96/108/sustainable-procurement-barometer-2024-4.pdf>

Edelman Trust Institute. (2026). 2026 Edelman Trust Barometer: Trust amid insularity. <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026-trust-barometer>

Reuters. (2025, February 4). Target is sued for defrauding shareholders about DEI.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/target-is-sued-defrauding-shareholders-about-dei-2025-02-03/>

Reuters. (2026, January 7). U.S. to withdraw from dozens of international bodies in major policy shift. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-withdraw-dozens-international-bodies-major-policy-shift-2026-01-07/>

KPMG. (2024). Survey of sustainability reporting 2024: Global insights. <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2024/survey-of-sustainability-reporting-2024.pdf>

Weinreb Group. (2025). The chief sustainability officer report 2025.

<https://weinrebgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2025-CSO-Report.pdf>

