

How to Lead Work & Careers

## Bill Gates: Mobilising political

### leaders and donors

Being clear about the mission has been key for the  
Microsoft co-founder

Andrew Jack 9 HOURS AGO

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The man who built Microsoft into one of the world's most valuable companies is no less hands-on in his second career as a philanthropist. Since its launch in 2000, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with an endowment of \$50bn, has become one of the largest grant-givers in the world, disbursing nearly \$5bn a year.

Reflecting on the lessons learnt Mr Gates, 63, stresses the need for data, systems and holding people to account as he seeks to spur policymakers to tackle [big global problems](#).

“Ten years ago, we were pretty naive,” he says. “We hoped if you invested and developed new technologies, the world would applaud and figure out how to get them into [the field].”

He describes himself as a strong believer in the power of innovative technologies to save and enhance human lives. He invests heavily in science to develop vaccines, which he cites as the area of his greatest impact.

But with adoption of vaccines sluggish, he has had to place greater focus on management, politics and health systems in his efforts to ensure that new products are also widely used. He cites the example of how he has become much more hands-on in seeking to eradicate polio from its remaining outposts including in Nigeria, one of the Foundation's flagship programmes in global health.

“We look at the delivery systems, the supply chain, the metrics,” he says. “We have a dashboard with the latest data, and several times a year I have a video conference with Nigerian state governors. We are making it a super-measured field.”

More broadly, he stresses the value of data to support his optimism about human progress.

Feedback

Last autumn, he unveiled his second annual [“goalkeepers” report](#), which summarises in a few graphs progress towards some of the most significant of the United Nations’ Sustainable [Development Goals](#) to reduce ill health, poverty and inadequate education.

Not all such advances can be linked directly to the activities of his Foundation, but Mr Gates sees plotting the advances as essential to his leadership role in mobilising political leaders and donors. “We want to meet every year and take some of the goals . . . talk about where the world is falling short, which countries are executing particularly well and maintain some energy around making the right investments,” he says.

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He has increasingly focused on Africa, where the population is projected to double by 2050.

The Foundation, which has grown to more than 1,500 staff in its Seattle headquarters, has eased its centralised control and expanded regional offices including in South Africa.

“The world has seen stunning progress against poverty over the last 30 years,” he says. “Whether you think about it from the point of view of poor people’s quality of life or global prosperity, what happens next . . . in sub-Saharan Africa matters a lot.”

The goalkeepers’ project highlights his focus on engaging with political leaders and praising their achievements to achieve impact. “It’s important to shine a light on progress. People are motivated by success,” Mr Gates says. “The fact that the world has cut child deaths in half in just 20 years — that gets people excited and makes them think about what else can be accomplished.

“It’s not easy for a leader to prioritise investments for which the pay-off isn’t immediate. Elections are rarely won because vaccination systems were strengthened, even though a strong vaccination system underlies a healthy, productive society.”

“It takes courage to decide health and development is important, and make it a priority,” he says. “Then it takes a commitment to tracking progress methodically and making changes when the data says you’re not reaching your goals.”

Those who attended business meetings over the years with Mr Gates say he can be a tough leader, berating participants. “I have definitely mellowed since the days at Microsoft when I didn’t believe in taking off weekends or going on vacations,” he says. “I think having a family really helped with that.”

“But I am still just as passionate about my work, and the underlying principles of the way I think about leading an organisation are the same. I try to be clear about our mission, build a strong team, and bring together partners to solve big problems. I have been fortunate in my career to have two amazing jobs where I get to work on important issues with smart, talented people. That’s a good recipe for loving coming to work.”

Mr Gates stresses the need to prioritise. Initially, he concentrated his philanthropy on global health issues and US domestic education. He has since diversified, adding agriculture, financial inclusion and more recently exploring international education.

He has also made an exception to his primary focus on tackling infectious diseases such as HIV, TB and malaria with personal contributions — outside the Foundation — to Alzheimer’s research, a nod to his father’s recent diagnosis with the disease.

“We don’t build roads. Our deep deep areas of expertise are health and agriculture. Our initial focus was global health and US education. In global health, overall we’ve done a great job, we feel more impact than we expected.”

In education, the impact has been more disappointing to date and he is still seeking ways to intervene with impact. “[In education] your challenge is always scaling up. No doubt you can help a school do very well but getting out to move the broader numbers on how the US compares on math, reading, writing are as yet unsolved.”

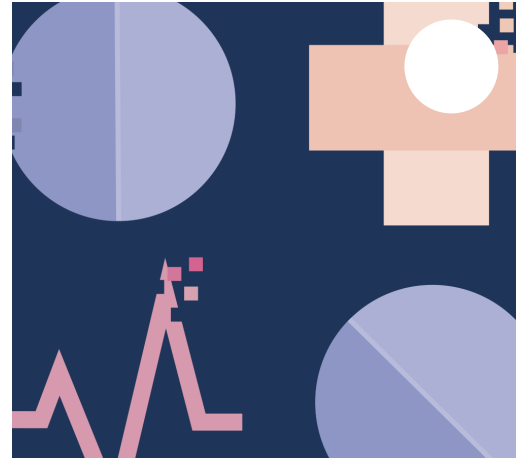
Mr Gates has expanded his activities outside the Foundation, through his own private office for investments, while Melinda has created her own office. But he stresses his continued commitment and primary focus is on the foundation’s work. “The only . . . really big thing outside [of the foundation] is energy-related innovation, to provide cheap energy and avoid climate change. Because it relates to private companies . . . it’s done with private investment.”

Asked to cite his own role models as leaders, he cites Nelson Mandela for his “moral courage”, his own father for his wisdom, and Warren Buffett, the billionaire investor and [joint backer](#) of his Foundation as “someone I look up to for the way he thinks about business as well as having fun in life.”

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