



Staying Ambitious: Moving internal business stakeholders from engagement to action - practical insights from social impact professionals

Introduction

In periods of economic uncertainty, geopolitical conflict, organisational restructuring, and growing regulatory pressure, businesses are increasingly strained by competing priorities. Yet these same conditions make social impact leadership more important, not less. The challenge for social impact professionals is no longer simply generating awareness, interest or passive engagement; it is moving stakeholders toward meaningful and sustained action.

We asked seasoned social impact professionals from across the Business Fights Poverty community how they move internal stakeholders across business functions from engagement to taking productive action. The insights in this paper draw on their experiences and reveal that successful stakeholder activation rarely comes from persuasion alone. Instead, it is built through long-term relationship development, emotional connection, operational clarity, and practical pathways to participation. Across the examples shared, effective practitioners demonstrate an ability to connect social impact goals directly to business realities while maintaining authenticity, trust, and ambition.

Five consistent insights emerged:

1. **Speak the language of business and individual motivation:** social impact initiatives gain traction when they clearly align with business priorities, leadership goals, compliance requirements, or professional development.
2. **Invest in relationships before making the ask:** trust, shared values, and in-person engagement create the foundation for long-term collaboration and action.
3. **Reduce perceived risk and complexity:** stakeholders are more likely to act when social impact participation feels practical, manageable, and aligned with operational realities.

4. **Let proximate voices lead the call to action:** authentic stories and direct interaction with people affected by social issues create emotional connection and credibility that data alone cannot achieve.
5. **Start with clear and achievable next steps:** activation increases when stakeholders are given tangible entry points and practical implementation guidance.

The paper also highlights a broader shift in the role of social impact professionals. Increasingly, success depends on being commercially aware, emotionally intelligent, technically credible, and operationally pragmatic. Professionals must navigate collaboration and competition simultaneously, sustain momentum through leadership transitions, and translate abstract principles into practical action.

At a time when many systems and stakeholders are under strain, these insights demonstrate that businesses do not need to lower ambition on social impact. Instead, they need approaches that are more relational, practical, and strategically integrated into how organisations operate.

Summary Table

Expert Quotes	Key Insight	Key Advice
<p>“Stakeholders act when social impact is framed not as an extra, but as a route to solving a recognised business challenge.”</p> <p>“The most effective ask connects purpose with priorities: strategy, risk, reputation, compliance, or professional growth.”</p> <p>“Action follows when people can see both the business case and their own role in making progress visible.”</p>	<p>Speak the language of the organisation and individual motivation: social impact initiatives gain traction when they clearly align with business priorities, leadership goals, compliance requirements, or professional development.</p>	<p>Anchor every social impact ask in a recognised business priority, operational challenge, or strategic objective.</p> <p>Understand and speak to both organisational and personal motivations, including leadership visibility, legacy, and career development.</p> <p>Translate principles into practical implementation steps using simple, clear, business-focused language.</p>
<p>“Trust is built before the ask is made; meaningful action depends on relationships, not transactions.”</p> <p>“Face-to-face engagement creates the shared understanding that no presentation can replicate.”</p> <p>“Partnerships move further when we offer value first, listen deeply, and build from common ground.”</p>	<p>Invest in relationships before making the ask: trust, shared values, and in-person engagement create the foundation for long-term collaboration and action.</p>	<p>Invest time in understanding stakeholders personally before making significant asks or requests.</p> <p>Prioritise face-to-face engagement and authentic experiences that build trust and shared understanding.</p> <p>Approach partnerships with humility and reciprocity by offering value before seeking commitment.</p>
<p>“Ambitious goals become actionable when they are broken into clear, manageable steps.”</p> <p>“Stakeholders are more likely to engage when the path is practical, the expectations are clear, and the risks are understood.”</p> <p>“The role of good facilitation is to reduce friction: clarify the ask, define the next step, and make participation feel achievable.”</p>	<p>Reduce perceived risk and complexity: stakeholders are more likely to act when social impact participation feels practical, manageable, and aligned with operational realities.</p>	<p>Break ambitious goals into clear, manageable next steps that feel achievable for stakeholders.</p> <p>Provide practical implementation guidance, operational clarity, and measurable expectations.</p> <p>Anticipate emotional and reputational concerns and proactively create reassurance, coaching, and support.</p>
<p>“Data builds the case, but authentic human stories create the commitment to act.”</p> <p>“The most powerful call to action often comes from those closest to the issue, not from those presenting the strategy.”</p> <p>“Real-life examples turn abstract impact into something stakeholders can understand, believe in, and support.”</p>	<p>Let proximate voices lead the call to action: authentic stories and direct interaction with people affected by social issues create emotional connection and credibility that data alone cannot achieve.</p>	<p>Prioritise authentic human stories and direct interaction over heavily scripted presentations or data-heavy communications.</p> <p>Enable people closest to the issue to share their experiences and invite participation where appropriate.</p> <p>Use peer influence and visible participation from others to build confidence and momentum.</p>
<p>“Momentum starts with a practical next step that stakeholders can take immediately.”</p> <p>“Activation grows when people are given accessible entry points that build confidence over time.”</p> <p>“Persistence matters: keep the issue visible, keep the ask simple, and keep creating opportunities to act.”</p>	<p>Start with clear and achievable next steps: activation increases when stakeholders are given tangible entry points and practical implementation guidance.</p>	<p>Always provide a clear, practical next step that stakeholders can take immediately.</p> <p>Create accessible entry points that build confidence and momentum over time.</p> <p>Maintain visibility and persistence even when competing business pressures increase.</p>

The Five Key Insights

1. Make Social Impact Relevant to Business and Personal Success

Align social impact with business priorities, operational realities, and individual motivations.

One of the clearest insights emerging from the discussions is that internal stakeholders are far more likely to take action when social impact initiatives are framed as relevant to both the business and the individual. Successful engagement requires social impact professionals to understand the language, pressures, incentives, and priorities of business stakeholders and to position opportunities accordingly.

A recurring theme from the experienced practitioners who contributed to this paper was the importance of anchoring social impact work within business strategy, compliance priorities, operational needs, or company purpose. Stakeholders were more responsive when initiatives clearly connected to recognised organisational objectives rather than being presented as separate “good causes.” Particularly during periods of strain, businesses are prioritising actions that can demonstrate relevance to resilience, reputation, efficiency, leadership goals, or regulatory expectations.

Importantly, practitioners also highlighted that motivations are rarely purely organisational. Individuals themselves are motivated by a combination of professional and personal drivers: career development, reputation, networking opportunities, legacy, purpose, and leadership visibility. Effective social impact professionals recognise this dual dynamic and tailor engagement accordingly.

The examples shared by contributors demonstrate that translating abstract social impact goals into practical business relevance is critical. One practitioner described the intensive process of collaboratively developing responsible purchasing practice frameworks “to every letter, every word” alongside businesses. What made this approach successful was not simply the principles themselves, but the operational clarity provided around “what good looks like” and how implementation could work in practice. Business leaders who were asked to adopt these frameworks needed guidance that translated ambition into tangible actions, measurable expectations, and operational reality.

Another important lesson was the need to simplify language. Practitioners repeatedly noted that jargon from philanthropy or social enterprise sectors can alienate business stakeholders. Clear, practical communication builds

credibility and helps social impact professionals position themselves as strategic partners rather than external advocates disconnected from commercial realities.

At a time when businesses face growing regulatory pressure, fragmented frameworks, restructuring, and leadership turnover, organisations need social impact approaches that support rather than compete with business priorities. This creates an opportunity for social impact professionals to demonstrate that ambitious impact work can strengthen organisational resilience, improve operational efficiency, reduce duplication, and support long-term business sustainability.

Key Advice

- Anchor every social impact ask in a recognised business priority, operational challenge, or strategic objective.
- Understand and speak to both organisational and personal motivations, including leadership visibility, legacy, and career development.
- Translate principles into practical implementation steps using simple, clear, business-focused language.

2. Build Trust Before Asking for Action

Invest deeply in relationships, shared values, and human connection before seeking commitment.

The strongest examples of internal stakeholder activation were built on relationships developed over time rather than transactional engagement. Social impact professionals consistently emphasised that meaningful action depends on trust, shared understanding, and authentic relationships, often cultivated long before any formal “ask” is made.

Several contributors described spending one to two years investing in relationship-building before significant collaboration emerged. This investment included creating values-based alignment, meeting in person, establishing shared visions of the future, and taking time to understand stakeholders as individuals rather than simply organisational representatives.

In-person engagement was highlighted repeatedly as particularly important. Face-to-face interaction helps build trust, overcome scepticism, and create the human connection needed to move beyond surface-level engagement. In complex business-to-business environments, where organisations may simultaneously be competitors, clients, or collaborators,

trust becomes even more critical. Participants noted that many partnerships struggle because of perceived ulterior motives, unclear starting points, or tension between traditional funder-recipient dynamics and genuine partnership approaches.

A key insight was that stakeholders should first be engaged in ways that feel relational and developmental rather than demanding. Examples included inviting business leaders to act as mentors or coaches, or providing first-hand exposure to social enterprises and beneficiaries before requesting deeper involvement. These early experiences allow stakeholders to connect emotionally and intellectually with the issue while building confidence and ownership gradually.

The discussions also highlighted the importance of humility and reciprocity. Effective practitioners ask themselves: “What can we give before asking for something in return?” This mindset helps establish social impact work as collaborative rather than extractive. It also creates stronger long-term partnerships that are more resilient during periods of organisational change or leadership transition.

Creating a shared vision of the future was another important practice. Stakeholders are more likely to act when they feel they are contributing to something meaningful and collectively owned. Rather than presenting fixed solutions, successful practitioners co-created pathways forward with stakeholders, consistently asking: “What’s the next action we can take together?”

During periods of uncertainty and constraint, relationship-building can feel time-consuming compared to short-term delivery pressures. However, the evidence suggests that trust-based engagement is not a distraction from action; it is what enables sustained action to happen.

Key Advice

- Invest time in understanding stakeholders personally before making significant asks or requests.
- Prioritise face-to-face engagement and authentic experiences that build trust and shared understanding.
- Approach partnerships with humility and reciprocity by offering value before seeking commitment.

3. Reduce Risk and Make Participation Feel Achievable

Remove emotional, operational, and reputational barriers that prevent stakeholders from taking action.

Another consistent insight shared by the social impact practitioners was that internal stakeholders often fail to move from engagement to action not because they lack interest, but because participation feels risky, unclear, overwhelming, or difficult to prioritise amid competing pressures.

Social impact professionals, therefore, play an important role in reducing perceived risk and making participation feel manageable. This includes understanding emotional concerns, operational constraints, reputational sensitivities, and practical limitations that may prevent action.

Contributors described how businesses today are operating under increasing strain: regulatory pressure is rising, leadership priorities are shifting rapidly, organisational restructuring is common, and many teams face competing demands. In this environment, even supportive stakeholders may hesitate if participation appears too resource-intensive or disconnected from core responsibilities.

One effective response is breaking large ambitions into smaller, tangible next steps. Rather than overwhelming stakeholders with broad system-change objectives, successful practitioners create practical entry points that feel achievable. Mentoring programmes were repeatedly highlighted as an example of an accessible first action because they provide a clear role, manageable time commitment, and direct human connection.

Operational clarity also emerged as essential. Businesses are more likely to act when social impact professionals provide concrete implementation guidance rather than abstract principles alone. Examples included creating detailed frameworks, collaborative drafting processes, clear measurement criteria, and practical guidance around implementation. These approaches reduce uncertainty and help businesses understand exactly what participation requires.

Another important aspect of reducing risk is emotional reassurance. Stakeholders may worry about appearing underprepared, saying the wrong thing, or lacking expertise. Practitioners described supporting stakeholders through coaching, exposure, mentoring, and practical guidance to build confidence gradually.

The discussions also highlighted the importance of reducing duplication and administrative burden wherever possible. Shared systems such as collaborative audit frameworks succeeded partly because businesses recognised that working together could reduce inefficiency and operational complexity.

At a broader level, reducing risk means acknowledging commercial realities openly. Businesses are more likely to trust social impact professionals who demonstrate transparency about limitations, recognise operational pressures, and show willingness to compromise where necessary. Collaboration requires flexibility, patience, and realism alongside ambition.

In times of conflict and constraint, ambitious social impact work becomes more achievable when practitioners focus not only on inspiring action, but also on removing the barriers that make action difficult.

Key Advice

- Break ambitious goals into clear, manageable next steps that feel achievable for stakeholders.
- Provide practical implementation guidance, operational clarity, and measurable expectations.
- Anticipate emotional and reputational concerns and proactively create reassurance, coaching, and support.

4. Let Authentic Voices & Experiences Drive Action

Create emotional connection through direct stories, lived experience, and authentic interaction.

One of the most powerful insights from the discussions was that stakeholders are moved to action more effectively by authentic human connection than by presentations, reports, or data alone. Emotional engagement creates the motivation that often turns passive support into active participation.

Participants repeatedly stressed the importance of allowing those closest to the issues to “show, tell, and ask.” When individuals directly affected by social challenges share their experiences authentically, stakeholders engage on a much deeper level than through abstract descriptions or institutional messaging.

A compelling example involved engaging a senior executive through the story of a young entrepreneur from Kenya, shared during a meeting of 500 senior executives. Rather than relying on a formal presentation, the

approach created an emotional and authentic moment that enabled direct connection between the executive and a mentor already involved in the programme. The result was immediate action: the executive stated, “I want to do what her mentor did,” and went on to become an active mentor for more than eighteen months.

This example demonstrates the unique power of proximate voices. The request for action did not primarily come from programme staff or institutional representatives. Instead, it emerged naturally from authentic human interaction and visible impact. Social impact professionals, therefore, play an important facilitative role: creating the conditions for meaningful connection while ensuring that no one feels pressured or tokenised in the process.

Authenticity was repeatedly identified as essential. Contributors highlighted the value of unscripted interaction, real-life stories, and direct exposure to social enterprises or beneficiaries. These experiences help stakeholders engage not only intellectually, but also emotionally and personally.

The discussions also suggested that emotional connection can help overcome some of the current challenges facing stakeholder engagement. Traditional business incentives alone, such as talent pipelines or reputational benefits, are increasingly insufficient in environments where every system and stakeholder feels strained. Human connection and purpose, therefore, become even more important motivators.

Peer influence also emerged as a valuable driver of action. Showing that others are already participating creates social proof and a “nudge effect” that reduces hesitation and builds confidence. Connecting prospective participants with existing engaged peers was seen as particularly effective.

In times of conflict and uncertainty, businesses often need renewed emotional connection to social impact work. Authentic stories and direct relationships remind stakeholders why the work matters and help sustain ambition when external pressures intensify.

Key Advice

- Prioritise authentic human stories and direct interaction over heavily scripted presentations or data-heavy communications.
- Enable people closest to the issue to share their experiences and invite participation where appropriate.
- Use peer influence and visible participation from others to build confidence and momentum.

5. Make Action Simple, Practical, and Immediate

Provide clear entry points, practical next steps, and sustained momentum toward action.

A final insight across the discussions with seasoned social impact practitioners was the importance of translating engagement into immediate, practical action. Stakeholders are far more likely to move forward when the path ahead feels clear, tangible, and achievable.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the value of asking: “What’s the next action we can take together?” This question shifts conversations away from abstract ambition toward practical collaboration. It creates momentum while helping stakeholders avoid becoming overwhelmed by the scale or complexity of social challenges.

Successful practitioners consistently simplified participation by creating easy entry points. Mentoring, coaching, first-hand exposure visits, and small collaborative projects were highlighted as effective starting actions because they are tangible, time-bound, and accessible. These actions help stakeholders build confidence and commitment gradually while strengthening longer-term engagement.

Practical implementation guidance was also critical. Businesses often struggle not because they disagree with principles, but because they lack clarity around how to operationalise them. Effective social impact professionals suggest focusing on translating ambition into concrete implementation steps, measurable criteria, and operational guidance.

Persistence over time emerged as a complementary ingredient. Contributors noted that social impact issues can easily lose visibility amid competing business pressures. Successful practitioners maintain momentum consistently, keeping issues visible while adapting engagement to changing business contexts.

The importance of flexibility and compromise was also emphasised. Collaboration rarely means that any one organisation gets everything it wants. Instead, progress depends on creating shared frameworks, reducing duplication, and finding practical pathways forward that different stakeholders can support.

Importantly, practitioners recognised that activation is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. Leadership transitions, restructuring, mergers, changing compliance demands, and shifting priorities all threaten continuity. Sustained action depends on building systems, relationships, and shared ownership that can survive organisational change.

This creates an important opportunity for ambitious social impact leadership. Rather than lowering expectations during difficult periods, organisations can focus on making participation easier, more practical, and more embedded within everyday business operations.

At a time when stakeholders face increasing complexity and constraint, practical action becomes a powerful form of leadership. Clarity, simplicity, and momentum help organisations continue delivering meaningful social impact even in challenging conditions.

Key Advice

- Always provide a clear, practical next step that stakeholders can take immediately.
- Create accessible entry points that build confidence and momentum over time.
- Maintain visibility and persistence even when competing business pressures increase.

The 5 C's of an Effective Social Impact Professional in Times of Constraint

The discussions with seasoned practitioners also revealed a distinct set of skills and competencies increasingly required for social impact professionals seeking to sustain ambition during periods of uncertainty, complexity and constraint. The following five competencies provide an easy framework for social impact professional development:

Competency	Description
1. CONNECT: Relationship Building, Emotional Intelligence and Stakeholder Navigation	Effective professionals build long-term trust across businesses, civil society, leadership teams, and operational functions while navigating complex stakeholder environments where organisations may both collaborate and compete. This includes understanding stakeholder motivations, fears, and aspirations, creating psychologically safe pathways to participation, identifying shared interests, and aligning priorities across diverse groups.
2. CONVENE: Facilitation, Influence and Collaboration	Professionals increasingly act as facilitators of collective action rather than simply advocates for issues. This requires the ability to manage compromise, balance competing interests, build consensus, foster shared ownership, and maintain trust across partnerships. Strong influence skills help create the conditions for meaningful collaboration and sustained engagement.
3. CONVERT: Strategic Translation, Commercial Awareness and Systems Thinking	Social impact professionals must translate social ambition into commercial and operational reality. This includes framing impact initiatives in ways that resonate with business priorities, regulatory pressures, and organisational incentives, while also understanding interconnected systems and identifying opportunities for collaboration, shared solutions, and long-term structural change.
4. CREATE: Operational, Technical and Implementation Credibility	Businesses increasingly require practical guidance rather than high-level ambition alone. Effective professionals need operational and technical expertise, including the ability to develop measurable frameworks, translate principles into actionable processes, provide realistic implementation pathways, and operationalise change in credible and practical ways.
5. COMMUNICATE: Communication, Simplicity, Persistence and Resilience	Strong professionals communicate clearly, simply, and authentically, avoiding jargon while using compelling storytelling that engages both hearts and minds. At the same time, they maintain momentum in environments where priorities shift rapidly and attention is fragmented, demonstrating patience, adaptability, persistence, and sustained focus over the long term.

Conclusion

The insights shared by the experienced social impact professionals who contributed to this paper demonstrate that moving internal business stakeholders from engagement to action requires far more than compelling messaging or strong intentions. It requires trust, relevance, emotional connection, operational clarity, and practical pathways to participation.

At a time when businesses face growing pressure from economic uncertainty, regulatory demands, organisational change, and geopolitical instability, social impact work can easily become deprioritised. Yet the experiences shared throughout these discussions suggest the opposite should happen: moments of strain create an even greater need for purposeful leadership, collaborative action, and human connection.

The most effective social impact professionals are those who understand both people and systems. They build relationships before making asks. They connect ambition to operational reality. They reduce barriers to participation. They create authentic emotional engagement. And they consistently translate vision into practical next steps.

Ultimately, staying ambitious on social impact during times of conflict and constraint does not depend on having perfect conditions. It depends on creating the trust, clarity, and momentum that enable stakeholders to act despite uncertainty.

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