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JOSTEIN SOLHEIM OF BEN & JERRY'S: EMPATHY IS NOT SIMPLY THE FLAVOR OF THE MONTH



Jostein Solheim is CEO of Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc., one of the world's most iconic ice creams and a company that is formally committed to growing its social impact even more than its profits. Jostein (pronounced 'Yo-Stein') joined Ben & Jerry's six years ago from [Unilever](#). Ashoka's Michael Zakaras recently sat down with him to discuss how business is changing and the skills – including empathy – that are needed to thrive in an interconnected world with customers demanding more of business each year.

Ashoka: *Did you ever imagine when you were younger that you might end up CEO of an ice cream company?*

Jostein Solheim: I grew up not really worrying at all about what I wanted to be. I was just focused on the journey I was on. My parents instilled in me an 'anything is possible' attitude that was empowering and freeing. We moved from southern to northern Norway at age seven, quite a pivotal age, and I had to adjust to a different culture and pretty much find my way again, and that was a big learning experience. It ended up, in many ways, being a roadmap for my adult life: relocating, finding my way within a new culture, and then doing it all over again.

Ashoka: You attended United World College which prioritizes social action and inter-cultural understanding. How formative were these years for you?

Solheim: Those were the most influential years of my life by far. They were when I discovered first hand so many of the challenges in the world, as told by the people living those challenges. And I got to work with them on solutions. These years were defined by immersion in the unfamiliar – I worked in a maximum security prison as a social worker, then as a skipper in the coast guard, among other things. This set of experiences challenged me and gave me the skills and sense of responsibility that you don't get from normal education. It's why I always value life experience in combination with a solid education.

I wasn't thinking about empathy consciously at the time, but there's no question that it was an implicit goal of the learning, and it grew from connecting with people across cultures, languages, perspectives. You know, it's quite easy to empathize with those in your clique – in your immediate circles – but the key is practicing this outside that narrow group so you can really connect with others and absorb and appreciate their experiences and the way they see the world. It's still a learning journey for me. This year we are beginning a significant equity campaign. The learning journey we've been on has raised my awareness of how some of our recent social mission projects, like climate, didn't resonate with people of color. Both Ben & Jerry's as an aspiring social justice company, and I as an individual are still learning!

Ashoka: Many people hear empathy and they think about getting along with others, or simply 'being nice' – so what is the relevance to business?

Solheim: Well for one, the world is so different today. You don't just live and work and interact with a few people in your community. Your customers and of course your colleagues too – they will come from all over. At Ben & Jerry's we range from pure artists to hard-core salespeople. Everyone must be able to connect and hear each other and motivate each other. And if they can't, suddenly there's all this extra noise and inefficiency. The relational bridges collapse and there goes your team performance.

The other piece is that the expectations of business are changing so quickly. It's not about 'what brand am I getting for what price point?' – but rather people want to see behind the brands to the companies and the employees and the role they play in society. In fact, a 2015 Nielsen survey showed that 66% of customers say they will pay more for a socially responsible product – and it's 75% among Millennials. They want transparency, they expect that businesses will do more than just make a profit, and they use social media and other channels to talk to companies and sometimes push them to do more, to be better. This means our employees can't hide behind the brand, but instead are the front line of the company, communicating directly with the world.

So this new world requires new skills and competencies – many from the old world just don't transfer, which is a concern for Unilever and lots of companies – and of course empathy is a central one. And it also means the best employees join your team with an open mind and a passion to be part of something bigger and to collaborate. Sometimes the MBA grad comes with

too many formulas and rules, and those hem you in because half the time the rules have changed within a year or two anyway.

Ashoka: Why does Ben & Jerry's refer to its customers as 'fans'?

Solheim: We call them fans because we think of them as more than just customers. They're buying our ice cream, yes, but they are bigger stakeholders in our company and we have a responsibility to them beyond a basic transactional exchange of product. Meanwhile, they want to understand our core beliefs and responsibilities and hold us to them – for example, what are we doing to address climate change? They become stakeholders in our company, and we don't want to let them down. And the same is true for our farmers, our suppliers, employers, and NGO partners – they all connect in a model we called 'linked prosperity', which is circular and reinforcing.

But as a values-led company, we sometimes push our fans as much as they push us. Here you can see where empathy in action is a powerful thing. For example, we've been strong ambassadors for LGBT equality even in contexts like Australia where the broad political support wasn't there yet. We were told: this is crazy, you'll lose customers. But this is a core belief of ours, and it's universal, so engaging was not so much a strategic choice as it was an authentic expression of who we are as a company. So we worked with partners and backed campaigns and eventually got a political party to support marriage equality in Australia. We moved the dial, and even brought fans along with us by leveraging the enormous respect they have for us as a company.

Ashoka: What role will Ben & Jerry's play in pushing business beyond its traditional boundaries?

Solheim: My target as CEO is to grow the social impact of Ben and Jerry's ahead of sales. And this is a core mission for us: making a values-led, linked prosperity business model the business model, and proving that it's scalable, replicable. One way we're doing so is joining the B Corp movement. And the other is using the fact that we are a public, visible, loved company to showcase openly what we're doing and why – to make it easier for others to follow suit.

I think in the end this is all inevitable – all business will have to become positive impact business because people will demand it and customers will buy from companies that include a corporate sense of empathy and focus on how they grow their impact on their global community.

But we can accelerate the shift by being a model and staying true to our commitments and by working with organizations like Ashoka, as we have for years with our Join Our Core entrepreneurial program, to make sure the next generation has the skills and the values to bring the structural changes we'll need to address the planet's biggest challenges.