
For Corporate & Foundation Leaders

How to Make Social Impact a Core Business Function

By Suze François, MPA | April 2, 2026

Every organization I have worked with that does this well has one thing in common.

They stopped treating social impact like a project.

Not a program. Not a report. Not a line item that gets cut when the budget conversation gets uncomfortable. They built it into how they operate. Into how they hire, how they source, how they measure performance, how they talk to their boards.

That is a fundamentally different posture. And most organizations have not done it yet.

**The question is not whether your organization is committed to social impact.
The question is where you put it.**

The Problem With the Program Model

Programs are useful. I have designed them. I have run them. At scale, across multiple countries, with real outcomes for real people. Programs are not the enemy.

But a program can be defunded. It can be deprioritized. It can survive a leadership change only to disappear in the next one. Its budget can be moved. Its team can be reassigned. Its outcomes can be quietly dropped from the annual report when they become inconvenient.

The program model puts social impact in a box that is adjacent to the business. And adjacent is fragile.

When social impact lives in a standalone function, it depends on two things to survive: a champion in leadership and a favorable operating environment. Remove either one, and the work is exposed. We have seen this play out in real time over the past few years. Organizations that never built their social commitments into operations are now discovering exactly how standalone their programs actually were.

This is not an indictment of the people who built those programs. It is a structural problem. And structural problems require structural solutions.

What Embedded Actually Means

Embedded social impact is not a rebranding exercise. It is not renaming your ESG team and calling it a strategy function. That does not fool anyone, and it does not change anything.

Embedding means the work migrates into existing functions. It means that the decisions those functions make every day begin to carry the weight of your social commitments.

What does that look like in practice?

IN PROCUREMENT

Supplier due diligence is not a separate social audit process that runs parallel to commercial negotiations. It is part of how the procurement team evaluates and selects vendors. Environmental and labor standards are built into the scorecard. They carry real weight in the decision.

IN HUMAN RESOURCES

Workforce dignity is not a training module that runs once a year. It is reflected in how the organization sets compensation benchmarks, how it structures career pathways, how it handles grievances, and how it measures manager performance. The HR team does not wait for the social impact team to tell them what matters.

IN FINANCE

Community investment is not a check written from a foundation account. It is built into how capital gets allocated. The business case for market development in underserved communities is made alongside every other investment case. Social return is part of how ROI gets defined.

IN COMMUNICATIONS

Impact reporting is not a feel-good supplement to the annual report. It is integrated into how the organization reports performance to its board, its investors, and its employees. The metrics are real. The methodology is disclosed. The story is consistent with the numbers.

**When it works, there is no ESG budget to cut.
Because the work dissolved into every other budget.**

The Five Moves That Make It Real

None of this happens by declaring it. It happens through a sequence of deliberate organizational moves, each one building the conditions for the next.

1. Start with materiality, not ambition.

The organizations that overextend their social impact commitments are usually the ones that chose issues because they sounded right, not because those issues connect to how their business actually operates. A logistics company that commits to the Boys and Girls Club is doing charity. A logistics company that commits to reducing emissions in its fleet and improving conditions for its drivers is doing strategy. Start with the intersection of your business and your impact. That is where embedding is possible.

2. Identify the function that carries the most weight.

You cannot embed everywhere at once. Find the function in your organization where social impact has the highest leverage and the most willing partners. Often it is procurement, because sourcing decisions touch communities, labor conditions, and environmental impact simultaneously. Sometimes it is HR. Start there. Build proof. Then expand.

3. Get the metrics into the existing measurement system.

If social impact has its own dashboard that only the social impact team looks at, it is not embedded. The metrics that matter need to live in the same place the business tracks everything else. Supplier turnover. Employee retention. Community employment rates in operating markets. These are business metrics. Treat them that way.

4. Tie it to accountability, not just aspiration.

If no one's performance review includes a social impact metric, social impact is not embedded. It is aspirational. Executive compensation tied to workforce outcomes. Procurement manager performance tied to responsible sourcing standards. Manager ratings that include how their teams are treated. Accountability is what turns intention into behavior.

5. Test whether the language follows the work.

If social impact is genuinely embedded into how your organization operates, you should be able to describe it accurately in the language of every function it lives in. Not because you are rebranding it. Because it is already there.

Procurement talks about supplier standards. HR talks about workforce stability. Finance talks about market development and long-term ROI. If your social impact work is embedded in those functions, those conversations are already happening and they are already describing the work accurately, in terms those functions understand and own.

If you cannot describe the work in those terms without feeling like you are hiding what it is, that is not a communication problem. It is a signal that the embedding is not complete. The language does not create the reality. But it does reveal it.

Where to Start

If your organization is still in the program model, the goal is not to tear it down. It is to begin the migration. A few honest questions to start with:

- Which of our social commitments connects directly to how we make money, source materials, or employ people? Start there.
 - Which business function has leadership that understands why this work matters to the business? Build the relationship there.
 - What metrics are we tracking that only we ever look at? Which of those could move into the business's core reporting?
 - Who in executive leadership has accountability for a social outcome right now? If the answer is no one, that is the gap.
 - If our social impact team disappeared tomorrow, what would change in how the business operates? That answer tells you how embedded you actually are.
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The Standard Is Simple

Social impact that is embedded into business operations does not need a champion. It does not need a favorable political climate. It does not need a separate budget line that survives the next board meeting. It just needs the business to keep operating. Because the work is the business. That is the standard worth building toward. Not the program that runs well. The function that compounds over time.
