RESEARCH PAPER MMXXVI

Uncommon by *design.*

What moves us, what it costs us,
and what we might be wrong about.

A survey of forty-four people building alternatives to the systems they work in, set in dialogue with around one hundred peer-reviewed studies of people like them.

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HOW THIS RESEARCH WAS MADE

A note on tools, *and method*

Two AI tools were used in producing this paper, and it is only fair and correct to both the reader and the respondents to say so at the outset.

The literature review was facilitated using Consensus (consensus.app), an AI-powered search engine for academic research. Seven structured searches were run against the peer-reviewed literature, covering: the traits of mission-driven versus conventional entrepreneurs; introversion, sensitivity and learned social performance; whether entrepreneurial traits change over a career; burnout and attrition in mission-driven work; mission drift under scaling and institutional partnership; impact measurement in practice; and steward-ownership and mission-lock governance. Those searches surfaced the studies listed in the references. Every finding attributed to the literature in this paper comes from one of them.

The survey data was analysed with Claude (Anthropic), which was used to tabulate responses, cross-check every percentage against the raw export, test cross-tabulations, build the figures, and act as a critical reader on successive drafts.

What neither tool did was decide what the findings mean. The interpretation, the framing, the arguments and the errors are mine. Where the literature contradicts our data, that contradiction is reported rather than resolved.

This is not a systematic review, and it does not pretend to be. It is a structured orientation to what a discovery tool surfaced against seven questions I chose, held against forty-four responses from one professional network. Both halves have limits, and both are stated plainly in the pages that follow.

Executive Summary

I have spent thirty years in and around the argument that capital should be answerable for what it does. That's long enough to have been called naïve, difficult, insufficiently commercial and insufficiently mission-driven, sometimes in the same week. I've been called a tree hugger, Swampy and more names than I care to remember. I've also been at this long enough to notice that the people I recognise most quickly – across sectors, countries and generations – are not the ones who readily or easily agree with me, but the ones who lean in for the conversation, never the challenge. They are the ones who arrived at their position by a similar route.

For too long, I have wondered who we really are. Not our titles. Not our credentials. But who we are under the biographies. So, I decided to ask a few of these people. Forty-four of them to be precise. These are the people who are building alternatives to the systems they work in. They include founders, chief executives, chief impact officers, heads of sustainability, mostly in finance, mostly in the UK. They all answered a survey about where their journey began, what drives it, what it has cost, and what they still cannot decide. Their answers are set here against around a hundred peer-reviewed studies of people like them, surfaced through seven structured literature searches using Consensus.app.

I am one of these people. Which is the point and also the problem. Every methodological risk in this work runs toward somewhat flattering us, so the literature is used as a check rather than a backdrop. I've also included a full section to where I think our account of ourselves is least trustworthy. It is also an incredibly small community of people to survey so I do not pretend that this is an academic paper in any form. It is an exercise borne from curiosity and freely shared to stimulate further engagement and support those coming up through the ranks.

Most of what we describe has been observed before, in other countries and other sectors, by researchers with no stake in the answer. That is the most useful thing about the exercise. But three findings survive it.

1. Nobody sent us

Sixteen per cent name a mentor or early influence as a driver – the weakest of five options by a wide margin, in a group where 45% date their sense of being out of step to childhood. The literature describes early ideological and leadership socialisation shaping people toward this work. We describe something closer to its absence. An ecosystem assuming the next generation will be mentored into this may be waiting for a mechanism that does not yet exist at the scale. What does exist are values and the increasing ability of us all to assess when those values are not being reflected in what we see.

2. The thing we care most about is the thing no framework measures

Seventy-two per cent say the impact they are proudest of is a shift in someone's thinking. Twenty-four per cent say they do not measure what matters – they observe. Eight of those ten name shifts in thinking as their proudest contribution. I should be careful here, because my question did not distinguish between personal judgement and organisational practice. These are senior people in regulated firms, certified B Corporations, charities and other institutions who will be measuring extensively, much of it mandatory. The insight here is that where institutional measurement is in place, it is not necessarily where these people's confidence comes from. No framework in current use measures systemic change, so the contribution most of us name as our proudest is not unmeasured through negligence but unmeasurable with the instruments that exist. That gap sits underneath and on top of the disclosure and ratings architecture now being built globally.

3. We are negotiating with the mainstream, not fighting it

Nine per cent reject the mainstream outright. Fifty-nine per cent want scale without compromising integrity; 55% are actively trying to shift it; 75% respond to pushback by adapting rather than confronting. I call this conditional assimilation. The mission drift literature describes precisely the risk it attracts – in particular Bruder's 'practice drift', where the mission survives intact and the practices pursuing it quietly change. Every one of us reports adapting without compromising. Some of us must be wrong.

What we may be getting wrong

- Only one respondent in forty-four thinks failure can ever be a sign to stop. Persistence is the trait we are proudest of; at that ratio it is also an inability to potentially recognise a stop signal.
- "Democratic" ranks bottom among the futures we want, thirty points behind equitable and regenerative, in a group where 84% want power transparent. We haven't yet noticed the tension.
- The work has cost 70% of us time, 45% financial security, and 27% each health and relationships. What sustains us is not the mission, it is people, at 73%. An ecosystem depending on purpose in lieu of security has an attrition problem it has not yet costed.

What this means now

Put the three findings together and a coherent picture emerges, with consequences that probably don't need to wait for further research.

We have an unusually strong ethical consensus and an unusually weak structural one. Eighty-four per cent of us want power transparent and 77% want it stewarded rather than owned, but two-thirds are still working out what legal form should hold it. The ownership literature suggests that is not a lag on our part but an accurate reading of a field where no single model reliably preserves mission. The sector's response should therefore be to build the decision support system that doesn't currently exist, rather than to evangelise one specific model. This is a nascent and emerging conversation in my experience.

We are accountable, by our own account, to future generations and the planet. These are both constituencies that cannot readily engage with us. The only available substitute for that missing accountability is a measurement system we impose on ourselves, and a quarter of us have declined to impose one while locating our proudest work in a category no framework captures – system change. That is a live problem for the disclosure and ratings architecture now being built globally: it may be optimising against proxies its own practitioners don't completely trust to tell the whole story.

And we are working inside systems we do not control, protected by a conviction that everyone reports and that the drift literature says erodes invisibly. The practical implication is concerning and immediate. If conditional assimilation is the strategy, then the safeguard is governance rather than resolve: a board with the authority to say no, and a written account, made in advance, of what would count as having drifted from mission. Most of us have some version of the first. Almost none of us have the second.

Finally, what sustains this work is relational rather than ideological. People, not mission. Any serious attempt to keep experienced practitioners in the field should be designed around that, and around the fact that the costs are currently borne privately and counted nowhere.

What happens next, and how to join it

Forty-four peer-recruited responses from one network cannot support inference about a population, and this paper does not attempt to do that. What it can do is generate hypotheses precise enough to test, and three are worth testing properly:

- whether agreeableness falls over the course of a mission-driven career, which the trait literature names as its own most striking gap;
- whether the institutional metrics largely being developed increase practitioners' confidence, and, if not, what would; and
- whether an individual leader's stated posture toward incumbent systems predicts what later happens to their organisation.

None of this needs a bigger version of my survey. It needs an organisational psychologist, a sustainable finance researcher, someone who knows ipsative measurement, and a sampling frame that does not begin with one person's address book. It also needs practitioners outside the UK and outside finance, because the most valuable thing that could happen to these findings is for someone to complicate them.

If you recognise yourself in this paper, or you research people like us, or you think we have this wrong, I would love to hear from you. It's clear we have good people out there carrying the cost of the work that is needed, now more than ever. They need to be better understood so we can leverage that learning more in pursuit of the changes critically needed.

1. The question I couldn’t put down

I have spent thirty years in and around the argument that capital should be answerable for what it does. That’s long enough to have been called naïve, difficult, insufficiently commercial and insufficiently mission-driven, sometimes in the same week. I’ve been called a tree hugger, Swampy and more names than I care to remember. I’ve also been at this long enough to notice that the people I recognise most quickly – across sectors, countries and generations – are not the ones who readily or easily agree with me, but the ones who lean in for the conversation, never the challenge. They are the ones who arrived at their position by a similar route.

I have come to think of us as uncommon by design, and the phrase carries two meanings. Some of us were built for the edge – an early, involuntary sense of being out of step, usually noticed in childhood and long before there was language for it. And some of us are building the edge – the deliberate, structural, often slow work of making something exist that did not exist before. Most of the people in this survey are both. We did not choose to be unusual. We did choose what to do about it.

For too long, I have wondered who we really are. Not our titles. Not our credentials. But who we are under the biographies. So, I decided to ask a few of these people. Forty-four people I know, all of whom are building something intended to work differently from the thing it replaces, answered a survey about where their difference began, what drives it, what it has cost, and what they still cannot decide. Then I put their answers next to the academic literature on people like us: around a hundred studies of social entrepreneurs, mission-driven leaders, activists and sustainability professionals, surfaced through seven structured searches.

I want to be honest about the position this puts me in. I am not studying a group; I am asking my own kind about ourselves, using questions I wrote, distributed through a network I built, and interpreting answers I am predisposed to find sympathetic. Every methodological risk in this paper runs toward flattering us. I have tried to correct for that by looking hardest at the results that make us look worst, and by treating the literature as a check rather than a backdrop. Section 11 sets out where I think we are probably kidding ourselves.

What follows is no claim on uniqueness or revelation. Most of what these forty-four describe has been observed before, in other countries and other sectors, by researchers who were not personally invested in the answer. That turned out to be the most useful thing about the exercise. Where we replicate the literature, we are less exceptional than we think. That is actually quite reassuring for anyone who has felt marginalised and ‘othered’. There is community. Where we diverge, the divergence is worth taking seriously precisely because so much else lines up.

Three findings survive that test. We were not mentored into this. The thing we care most about is the thing no framework measures. And we are not, as a group, at war with the mainstream – we are negotiating with it, which is a riskier position than it feels from inside.

2. How this was done, *and what it can bear*

The survey

A multi-section instrument went to people I know and who know others who are actively building organisations or initiatives oriented around sustainability, impact or purpose, and who, in my judgement, materially challenge how their domain ordinarily works. Forty-four responded between May and July 2026, all completing the full instrument.

Seventy-five per cent work in the UK, 14% elsewhere in Europe, with single respondents in North America, Africa and the Middle East. Nobody from South America, Asia-Pacific or Scandinavia. The sector skew is toward finance – banking, asset management, investment management, impact investing, philanthropy – with a substantial minority from government, media, technology, agriculture, consulting and the charitable sector. Roles skew senior: founders, chief executives, chief impact officers, heads of sustainability, directors of impact. Some of the forty-four agreed to be named as contributors. Others cannot for valid reasons. To them all, thank you for sharing your insights, learnings and time on this little adventure. Your support and engagement have been truly welcomed and I hope you all find this as fascinating to read as I have found writing it!

The literature

I conducted 7 structured searches using the Consensus research platform (Consensus.app), covering:

- differences between mission-driven and conventional entrepreneurs;
- introversion, sensitivity and learned social performance;
- whether entrepreneurial traits change over a career;
- burnout and attrition in mission-driven work;
- mission drift under scaling and institutional partnership;
- impact measurement in practice; and
- steward-ownership and mission-lock governance.

That resulted in roughly around a hundred distinct studies, listed in full at the end. This is not a systematic review. It is more like a structured orientation, a finding of the feet so to speak. It reflects what a discovery tool surfaced against seven questions I chose. Where I say the literature appears not to address something, please read it as my searches didn't surface it.

On question design

Most questions are multi-select, deliberately. For those of captured in this research, doing the work we do, we did not arrive at this work for one reason, and we do not meet one form of resistance. Asking for a single driver or reason would have produced a tidier chart but a less accurate picture. Respondents selected between one and six options, averaging 2.4 on the origin questions and 3.3 on what would move the mainstream. The full question set is outlined in the annex.

A smaller number of questions is single-select, and those are the questions where choosing is the point: which ownership model, which goal, who we answer to, how we measure, which harm we most fear committing. Forcing a choice here reveals priority, and it actually does cost something to answer.

Multi-select results are reported as the percentage who selected; single-select as the percentage who prioritised. They are different quantities and I do not compare them. Where the two formats ask about the same thing – ownership appears in both – the gap between them is a finding, not an inconsistency.

One property of the multi-select design needs addressing. Where a group shares a worldview, agreement on items can bleed across the selection. As an example, three-quarters of us selected climate, three-quarters inequality, seven in ten broken economic models. Whilst it might appear unhelpful at a first glance, it is better read as we decline to rank our concerns given our knowledge of their interdependencies.

What this teaches us

Forty-four peer-recruited responses, no comparison group, one network, one country dominant. This generates hypotheses about a community. It establishes nothing about a category, and nothing here shows that these patterns distinguish us from anyone else. What makes the exercise worth publishing is the dialogue: a practitioner sample held against a substantial literature, agreeing in most places and departing in a few identifiable ones.

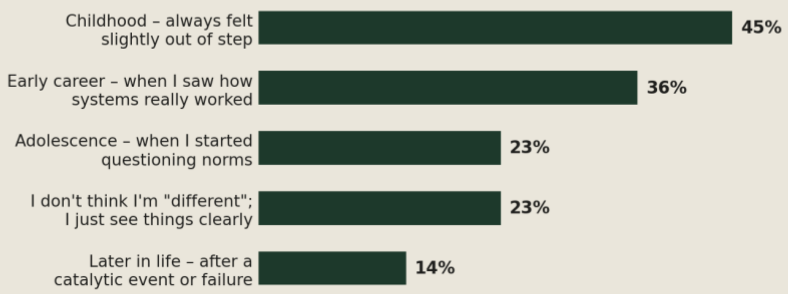
3. Where it starts, *and who wasn't there*

The literature says our kind of identity forms early, and that social entrepreneurs often report early ideological and leadership socialisation channelling sensitivity into activism and venture creation (Cohen et al., 2019; Bargsted et al., 2013). Krieger et al. (2021) go further: an entrepreneurial personality profile measured in adolescence predicts entrepreneurial activity across a lifetime.

On timing, we agree entirely. Forty-five per cent of us locate the first recognition of difference in childhood, 23% in adolescence, 36% in early career, and only 14% later in life after a catalytic event. This was not a decision. It was something noticed, usually in retrospect, often before there was any language for it.

FIGURE 1

When we first knew we didn't think like everyone else



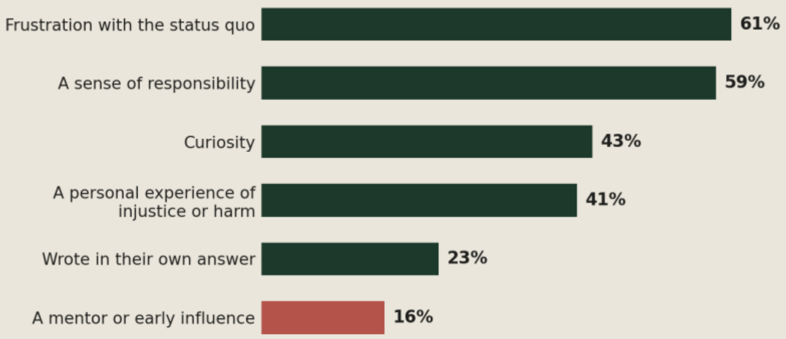
Multi-select; % of 44 respondents. Mean 1.4 selections each. Four of the ten who decline the label of difference also dated it.

Then there is the answer that disagrees with the question. Twenty-three per cent selected I don't think I'm "different"; I just see things clearly – and four of those ten also selected an origin point. They can date the experience of being out of step and simultaneously decline to call it difference. I find that one of the most interesting results in the survey. The disavowal of difference here is the insight.

But nobody sent us

Asked what pushed us toward the edge, frustration with the status quo leads at 61%, a sense of responsibility follows at 59%, curiosity at 43%, personal experience of injustice or harm at 41%. A mentor or early influence: 16%.

What pushed us toward the edge



Multi-select; % of 44. Mean 2.4 selections each. Nobody sent us: 7 of 44 name a mentor or early influence.

This is the first genuine divergence, and it is the one I keep returning to. The literature describes socialisation – environments, influences, people who shaped a young person toward this. We describe something closer to its absence. The two claims are not strictly identical; ideological socialisation is broader than a named mentor. But the gap is wide enough to be worth testing, and it is consistent with the write-in answers, which include never having felt like being in the centre, and seeing how the system was failing capable people.

Whatever produced us, we do not experience it as sponsorship. We worked out what we thought before anyone offered to help us think it.

If that is right, it has a practical consequence: an ecosystem that assumes the next generation will be mentored into this work may be waiting for a mechanism that does not yet currently exist. What does exist are values and the increasing ability of us all to assess when those values are not being reflected in what we see. How we work with that is the key to what we unlock.

And we did not all arrive the same way

Nearly a quarter of us wrote in a driver rather than accept the five offered:

- books and philosophy;
- missed opportunities;
- an ability to think across domains; and
- observing disconnects that did not make sense and which caused harm.

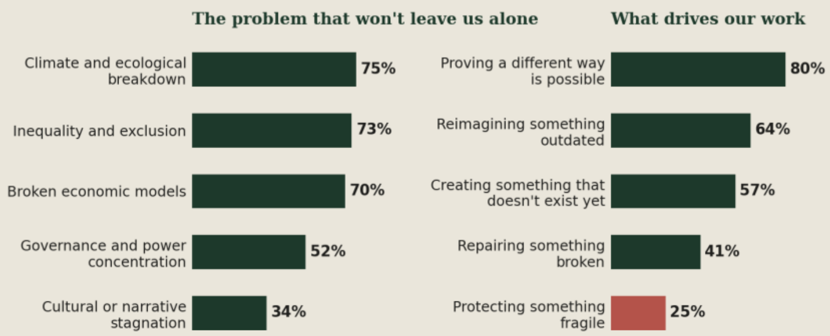
Lambrechts et al. (2020) identify critical life events as triggers, which fits the 41% describing injustice. Samuelsson and Witell (2022) find substantial heterogeneity among social entrepreneurs, distinguishing seekers, discoverers and rangers with different motivational patterns. They are right, and any story about us that insists on a single origin – including the wounded-healer story I was half-expecting to find – is flattening something real.

4. What won't leave us alone

– Climate and ecological breakdown, 75%.
– Inequality and exclusion, 73%.
– Broken economic models, 70%.
– Governance and power concentration, 52%.
– Cultural or narrative stagnation, 34%.

We selected 3.2 concerns each.

FIGURE 3
What won't leave us alone, and what we do with it



Both multi-select; % of 44. We selected 3.2 concerns each and declined to rank them. Only a quarter of us are protectors.

The finding is not the ranking, which is really too tight to mean anything. It is the refusal to separate. We do not experience climate, inequality and economic design as competing agendas requiring triage. We experience them as one problem seen from different angles, and several of us said so explicitly in the additional notes;

– the motivation to help others understand these problems are interconnected;
– the separation of business from society; and
– the in-between of all those things.

This matches the literature closely. Sastre-Castillo et al. (2015) find elevated self-transcendence and suppressed self-enhancement – status, power – in social entrepreneurial profiles. Cohen et al. (2019) and Bacq et al. (2016) find ideology, social justice and social value creation driving us where capital gain drives others. There's nothing really surprising here, and it is worth saying so.

What is far more discriminating is what we are trying to do about it.

– 80% of us are proving a different way is possible.
– 64% are reimagining something outdated
– 57% creating something that doesn't exist yet
– 41% repairing something broken, and
– Only 25% protecting something fragile.

We are largely demonstrative and creative, not the activist protectors many might think we are. Our instinct is toward proof – building the counter-example and making the argument in the form of a working 'thing'. That sits oddly next to the fact that three-quarters of us name ecological breakdown as the problem that will not leave us alone. We are ecologically motivated and constructively oriented. We want to build the alternative rather than guard the remnant, and I am not certain that is always the right division of labour.

5. What we meet, *and what we do about it*

What we encounter is not what public argument says we encounter.

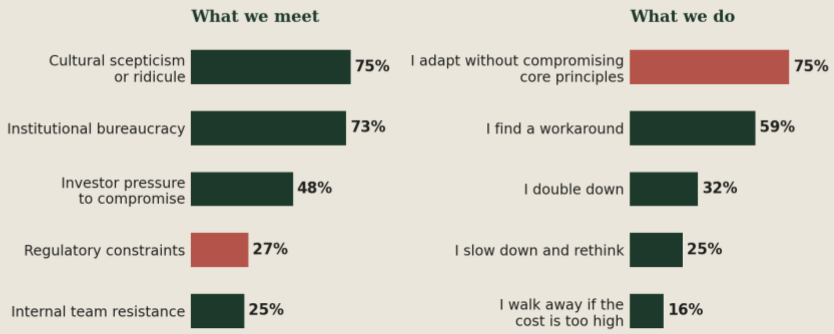
- Cultural scepticism or ridicule, 75%.
- Institutional bureaucracy, 73%.
- Investor pressure to compromise, 48%.
- Regulatory constraints, 27% (that's fourth, in a group substantially drawn from regulated finance).

Just over a quarter wrote in something else:

- apathy;
- short-termism and the inability to think outside immediate priorities or thematic silos;
- the idea that these areas are binary or political when they are systemic; and
- fear, self-interest, inertia.

The dominant resistance is social. We are laughed at, and we are slowed down.

FIGURE 4
The resistance we encounter, and how we respond



Two multi-select questions, each ranked independently; % of 44. Regulation ranks fourth in a group drawn largely from regulated finance.

Our response is not defiance (although I think we all probably like to think of ourselves as at least mildly defiant on certain days!). Seventy-five per cent of us adapt without compromising core principles. Fifty-nine per cent find a workaround. Thirty-two per cent double down. Sixteen per cent walk away when the cost is too high.

The write-ins describe the posture better than my options did:

- going where the energy is;
- not pushing against closed doors but deviating toward where movement is possible;
- maintaining strategic integrity while adapting tactically; and
- understanding that restraint can be a virtue as long as you do not forget your idea.

The literature has already named this trend. Nave and Katz (2024) call us **consistent chameleons** – values-driven but adaptive, holding social and commercial logics together.

Ghalwash et al. (2017) and Sabbir et al. (2025) describe compassionate risk-takers persevering in inefficient or hostile environments. Both fit.

Where I think we add something, though, is on what the chameleon behaviour is. In the literature it is a strategy: an organisational competence for managing institutional paradox. In our answers it looks more like an adaptation with a personal cost attached – because the same people who adapt rather than confront also say the thing they most had to unlearn was people-pleasing, and that what people most misunderstand about them is intensity and optimism rather than accommodation. Chameleon behaviour as strategy and chameleon behaviour as survival look identical from outside the organisation. They do not feel the same from inside the person, and the literature has so far measured only the first.

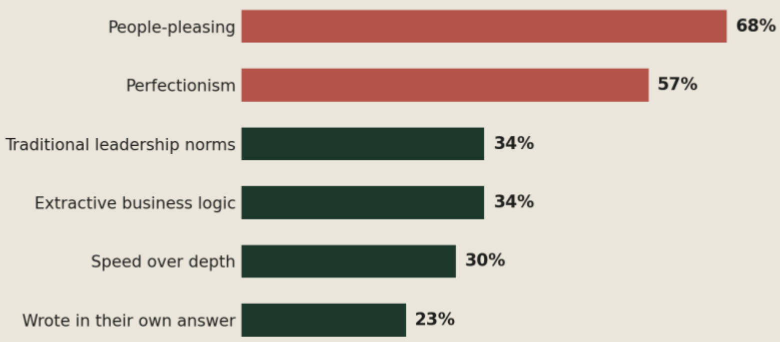
I should also flag the obvious problem with this result. The option 'I adapt without compromising core principles' is probably the most flattering sentence in the survey. There is no version of it any of us would decline. Its 75% is highly likely to be a self-description, not an observed behaviour. Section 11 returns to what that might be concealing.

6. What we had to stop being

Asked what we had to unlearn: people-pleasing, 68%. Perfectionism, 57%. Traditional leadership norms, 34%. Extractive business logic, 34%. Speed over depth, 30%.

FIGURE 5

What we had to unlearn



Multi-select; % of 44. The two leading answers are psychological rather than ideological.

What we had to shed in order to build something different was not primarily a belief about markets or growth. It was the need to be liked, and the need to be flawless.

The write-ins reflect the same messages:

- taking things personally;
- being taught to conform or operate in silos;
- being subservient to orthodoxy;
- the need to justify;
- defensiveness;

the assumption that others will have the answer; and, from one respondent with more honesty than most of us manage (you know who you are and this is just to say I love you!)

- thinking my way is the best way.

Now put two literatures and our research side by side:

- The social entrepreneurship literature finds us high in agreeableness (Kruse & Rosing, 2023; Cohen et al., 2019; Nga & Shamuganathan, 2010; Sastre-Castillo et al., 2015).
- The general entrepreneurship literature finds the entrepreneurial profile – high extraversion, conscientiousness, openness – to be low in agreeableness (Krieger et al., 2021).
- And we are describing having deliberately reduced our agreeableness over a career: unlearning people-pleasing is, in trait language, becoming less agreeable on purpose.

That's 3 bodies of evidence pointing at the same variable from different directions, and a testable proposition sitting in the middle: that agreeableness in this population is not a stable disposition but a trajectory.

The trait literature is delightfully candid that it cannot currently answer this. Its own summary identifies the near-absence of longitudinal studies measuring within-person personality change over an entrepreneurial career, and notes that no study in the corpus uses a repeated-measures design to show that doing entrepreneurship alters traits rather than merely selecting for them. Cao et al. (2022) explicitly call for pre- and post-venture measurement and describe it as underexplored.

There is also a strong result against our survey. For the record, López-Núñez et al. (2020) compared practising entrepreneurs with high-intention students and found the same personality profile, concluding that traits precede action rather than resulting from it. That is some evidence for stability. But it does not settle the question. Group-level equivalence does not rule out within-person change, and the sample is general rather than values-driven entrepreneurs. However, anyone minded to advance our unlearning hypothesis will have to answer that question.

One further structural point. A large share of the personality work on people like us measures intention among students and prospective founders (Nga & Shamuganathan, 2010; Tan et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2021; Bacq & Alt, 2018; Liu et al., 2020; Riedo et al., 2019; Sabbir et al., 2025), or perceptions of what social entrepreneurs are like (Kruse & Rosing, 2023). Unlearning cannot appear in an intention study, because it happens after you start. If some of what the literature records as our traits is actually acquired, then measuring at the point of intention is capturing the wrong thing at the wrong time.

7. What we cannot decide

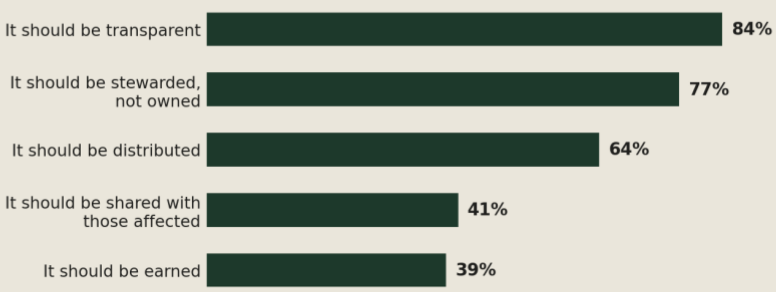
On power, we are close to unanimous:

- It should be transparent, 84%.
- Stewarded, not owned, 77%.
- Distributed, 64%.
- Shared with those affected, 41%.
- Earned, 39%.

We selected three positions each; these are facets of one view rather than alternatives.

FIGURE 6

How we think about power

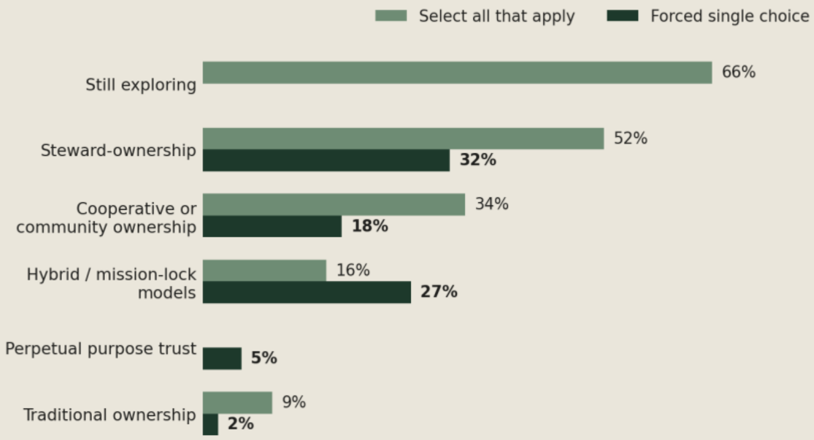


Multi-select; % of 44. We selected three positions each – these are facets of one view rather than alternatives.

On ownership, the agreement dissolves.

FIGURE 7

Ownership: what happens when we have to choose



Same subject, two question formats. 'Still exploring' was offered only in the permissive version; 16% wrote in their own answer when forced to choose.

Asked to select every model aligned with our values, the most-chosen answer is I'm still exploring – 66%, ahead of steward-ownership at 52%. Thirteen of the twenty-three who chose steward-ownership also called themselves still exploring. Force the choice, and steward-ownership falls to 32%, with hybrid mission-lock structures close behind at 27%. Among the twenty-nine still exploring, more landed on hybrids than on steward-ownership when compelled to choose.

I had assumed this might be a lag – that we were a decade behind our own ethics. The literature suggests I was being unfair. The steward-ownership research concludes that no single ownership model universally preserves mission; founders choose among trusts, foundations and employee ownership according to succession context, jurisdiction, and tolerance for rigidity versus flexibility (Gary, 2019, 2023; Ørberg, 2024; Gonza et al., 2026; Sanders, 2022). Kavadis and Thomsen (2022) find long-term ownership enabling but insufficient, with owner stewardship the missing contingency – and stewardship requiring relearning in each successive generation as commitment dilutes.

Our two-thirds who are still exploring may not be behind. They may be accurately tracking a genuine indeterminacy in the field.

That changes what the sector should do about it: not evangelise one model but build the decision support frameworks that currently don't exist.

What we want ownership for is clearer:

– Mission protection, 37%.
– Intergenerational stewardship, 22%.
– Long-term independence, 15%.
– Community accountability, 12%.
– Founder liquidity without mission drift, 10%.
– Protection and duration dominate; liquidity is a minority concern.

Thomsen et al. (2018) identify exactly this as a selection effect – long-termism drives the choice of foundation ownership, rather than foundation ownership producing long-termism.

FIGURE 8

What ownership is for, and who it answers to

Both single-select. Left panel: % of the 41 who answered. Right panel: % of 44. Protection and duration dominate; liquidity is a minority concern.

And who we answer to:

- future generations, 55%;
- the planet, 30%;
- community three
- people, workers two,
- customers one.

We hold ourselves accountable almost entirely to constituencies that struggle to engage with us. That is a coherent moral position and an incredibly challenging governance one, and it sets up the problem in Section 9.

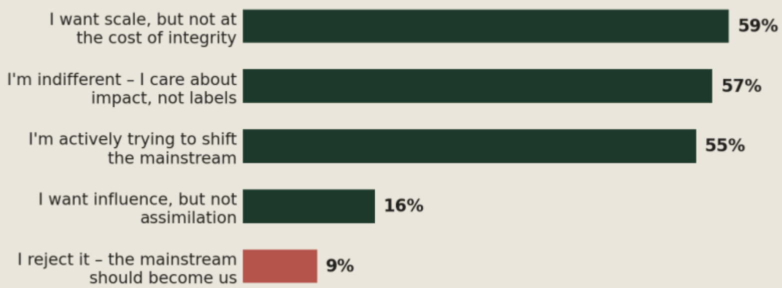
A quick note on where the literature stops. It maps legal vehicles and their properties in detail. But it has very little empirical work on how founders actually decide between them. That is the question our data is about, and it is very much an open question.

8. The mainstream, and the risk we are running

You may expect this section to show us as somewhat oppositional. It does not.

FIGURE 9

How we relate to becoming "mainstream"



Multi-select; % of 44. Fourteen of us hold the top and third positions together; ten hold the second and third.

Only 9% of us reject the mainstream outright – four people, one of whom selected that position alone. The overlaps carry the meaning. Fourteen of us hold scale but not at the cost of integrity together with actively trying to shift the mainstream – coherent, and strategically explicit. Ten hold indifferent to labels together with actively trying to shift the mainstream, which is less obviously coherent and probably more honest: caring intensely about the outcome while refusing the identity politics of the sector.

The free form answers have a similar tone:

- wanting the integration of people and planet to become the mainstream;
- being less convinced there is a mainstream anymore; and
- one respondent, conflicted, no longer comfortable in that space but working on it because it is not about them.

I think we can call this posture **conditional assimilation**: an explicit willingness to enter, scale within and work through incumbent systems, bounded by a stated non-negotiable.

Compromise does not embarrass us. It is a strategy most of us have arrived at independently, having concluded that walking away accomplishes nothing.

And here is where the literature gave me pause for thought

Mission drift is a mature field, and it describes with some precision what happens to people in our position. Ometto et al. (2019) show scaling producing organisational compartmentalisation that severs an enterprise from its institutional context. Barinaga (2018) studies a social venture in cross-sectoral partnership and finds weaker partners in strategic action fields at risk of co-optation by dominant incumbent actors. Cornforth (2014) shows that dependence on any dominant funder produces drift, and that it often occurs through less visible changes to working practices rather than formal changes of mission. Ebrahim, Battilana and Mair (2014) put governing boards at the centre of holding conflicting objectives together. Zhuang et al. (2025) find that leaders' financial motivation facilitates drift while prior business experience restrains it, with governance structure moderating both. Financial motivations creating mission drift is a dynamic I have seen too often for my own liking.

Most pointedly, Bruder (2025) distinguishes mission drift from practice drift – where the mission survives intact and the practices used to pursue it quietly change. That is precisely the failure mode our 75% who adapt without compromising core principles is exposed to. What counts as a core principle is exactly the thing that erodes, and it erodes without announcing itself, which is why every one of us can report adapting without compromising and some of us must be wrong.

I do not think this invalidates conditional assimilation. The same literature is clear that drift is not inevitable: it depends on governance design, leadership characteristics and the power dynamics of the partnership rather than on scale as such (Wolf & Mair, 2019; Ramus & Vaccaro, 2017; Nkabinde & Mamabolo, 2022). Mersland et al. (2019), studying 199 microfinance organisations, found strong coherence between stated missions and actual practices, suggesting drift may be less prevalent than assumed. Gopakumar (2022) documents an organisation reconceptualising its means while preserving its guiding principles.

If the strategy is to work within, then the protection is not conviction – conviction is what everyone has and says they have. The protection is governance: a board with the standing to say no, and an explicit, written account of what would count as having drifted.

Most of us, I suspect, have the first in some form and almost none of us have the second.

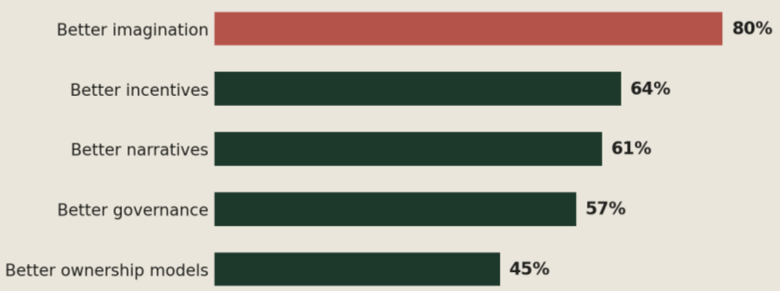
On what would move the mainstream:

- better imagination 80%
- better incentives 64%
- better narratives 61%
- better governance 57%
- better ownership models 45%

We selected 3.3 answers each, so this is a crowded field rather than a standalone verdict. Still, the order tells you something. A group drawn largely from finance might have been expected to name incentives first. It did not.

FIGURE 10

What would move the mainstream



Multi-select; % of 44. We selected 3.3 answers each. A group drawn largely from finance might have named incentives first. It did not.

9. What we measure, *and what we cannot*

This section carries a design flaw in my own question, which I set out below. It turned out to be a useful one: working out what the answers could and could not support led somewhere more interesting than a really clean question would have.

FIGURE 11

What we measure, and what we are proudest of

Both single-select; % of the 41 and 43 who selected a listed option. Eight of the ten who do not measure named shifts in thinking as their proudest contribution.

Asked to choose one answer to how we measure what matters, 34% name custom metrics aligned to mission, 20% long-term ecological or social indicators, 12% narrative and cultural influence, and 10% stakeholder feedback. Twenty-four per cent say they do not measure – they observe.

Asked which impact we are proudest of that nobody sees, 72% name shifts in thinking. Avoided harm follows at 12%; quiet repair, internal culture and community trust account for seven people between them. It is the most concentrated result in the survey.

First, a problem with my own question

I asked "how do you measure what matters?" and specified neither whose measurement nor what matters. A respondent could reasonably have answered about the metrics their organisation reports under SDR or SFDR, about their B Impact Assessment, about charity impact reporting – or about how they personally judge whether their work has been worth doing. Almost certainly the answers are blended, and I can't separate them.

That matters because it rules out what could be a somewhat damning conclusion. Nothing here supports a claim that a quarter of this group has stopped measuring. These are senior people in regulated firms, certified B Corporations and registered charities. They are measuring, extensively, and much of it is mandatory. What the answers describe is something more nuanced and altogether more interesting.

What I think they are actually saying

The likeliest reading is that institutional measurement is in place but is not the prime mechanism by which these people know whether the thing that matters is happening. The frameworks run alongside a private, unquantified account of whether the work is actually working. When someone says they observe rather than measure, they are not describing an absence of metrics. They are describing where their real confidence comes from.

The two questions read together support that. Eight of the ten who chose “observe” named shifts in thinking as their proudest contribution. Nine of the ten define success as systemic change. Half cite gut instinct as a guide when the path is unclear – as, across the whole sample, do 48% of us, ahead of first principles.

And here is the structural point underneath it. No framework in current use measures systemic change. Impact measurement can capture allocated capital, revenue alignment, emissions avoided, beneficiaries reached. It cannot capture whether the way a sector thinks about its purpose has moved, because there is no unit for that and no counterfactual. So the thing 72% of us name as our proudest contribution is not unmeasured through negligence. It is unmeasurable with the instruments that exist.

That is the more nuanced insight, and I think it is the right one: not that expert practitioners have abandoned measurement, but that a gap has opened between what the frameworks capture and what the people building them believe they are for.

What the literature says, and where this exercise

Maas and Grieco (2017), using GEM data across 3,194 social enterprises, find only about a third measure impact at all. Molecke and Pinkse (2017) describe impact measurement as bricolage – opportunistic collection of at-hand experiential data rather than causal-logic methodology. They catalogue four delegitimising critiques practitioners deploy against formal measurement, including that social impact is immeasurable and that measurement is irrelevant to decisions. Their respondents argue that intuitive gut feeling is sufficiently accurate. One describes impact as not an external factor you measure but something you can see; another describes working at the level of sense. Dalborg (2026) finds negligible progress over six years across five countries.

Our 24% might look like a replication of that work, but I do not think it can be claimed as one. Those studies examined organisational measurement practice; my question may have captured personal orientation (how we gain confidence in what we are doing). If so, we are not measuring the same construct.

What does survive the comparison is the sampling contrast. That literature draws on Lithuania (Pušinaitė-Gelgotė et al., 2019), Brazil, where evaluation remains at an initial stage (Da Silva Siqueira et al., 2021), South Africa, where most do not track impact at all (Nyoni & Maumela, 2026), and early-stage Swedish enterprises, where Bonnedahl and Stålnacke (2026) conclude that basic impact management is more appropriate than comprehensive measurement given resource constraints. The explanation running through all of it is capacity. Whatever is happening in our group, it is not that. These people have analysts and teams in support, and several of them have and are helping build the measurement systems others are required to use.

Two further findings somewhat support the conclusions here. Mitchell (2017) argues that elite narratives about the neutrality and transparency of metrics acquire legitimacy through philanthropic and political networks rather than through practitioner experience – in other words, how people feel about them and validate them rather than just use them without question. And Lutz et al. (2024) find that impact measurement requirements can themselves produce mission drift, raising expectations that compromise delivery. If measuring the wrong thing can damage the mission, then holding a separate account of the right thing is not negligence but judgement.

There is also something we add to the narrative. Molecke and Pinkse document at length why practitioners are sceptical of formal measurement. As far as these searches surfaced, nobody has asked what they would like to see developed instead. Seventy-two per cent of this group naming shifts in thinking is a positive answer to a question that has only been asked negatively.

I think this is closest to the surrogate endpoint problem in clinical research. When the outcome that matters is slow, diffuse and hard to observe, a field substitutes something faster and more tractable, then optimises for the substitute. Cardiovascular medicine measured arrhythmia suppression for years before discovering that the drugs which suppressed it increased mortality. Education measures test scores because learning is invisible. We measure allocated capital, revenue alignment and disclosure scores because a change in how a sector thinks cannot be put in a spreadsheet.

And it connects directly to Section 7. We hold ourselves accountable to future generations and the planet. Neither can readily call us and articulate precisely what it wants until we are already halfway there, or past the point of return. When the beneficiary cannot hold you to account, the substitute has to be a standard you impose on yourself – and for a quarter of us, that standard currently sits outside any measurement framework.

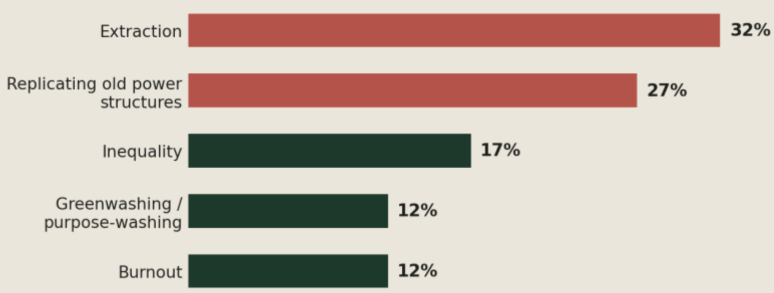
What we fear

Asked to name the one harm we are most actively trying to avoid:

- Extraction, 32%.
- Replicating old power structures, 27%.
- Inequality, 17%.
- Greenwashing or purpose-washing, 12%.
- Burnout, 12%.

One respondent named it exactly: replicating harmful assumptions and structures by accident.

FIGURE 12
The harm we are most trying to avoid

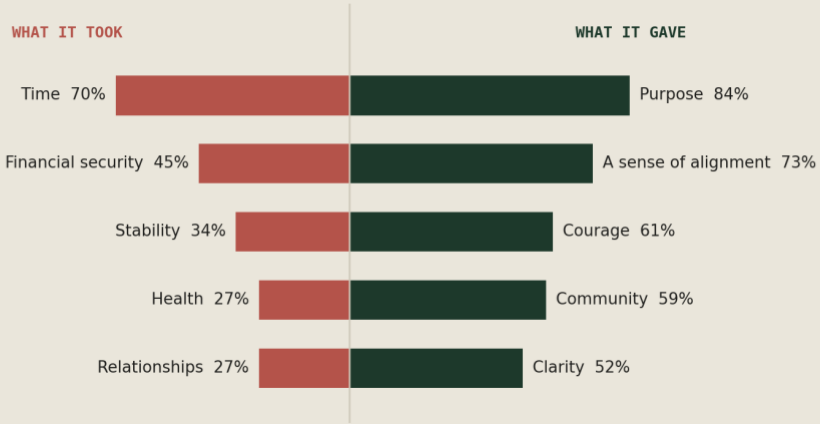


Single-select; % of the 41 who selected a listed option. The two leading answers describe harms committed by our own organisations.

Note what the two leading answers share. Both describe harms committed by our own organisations, not by the system we oppose. We are most afraid of becoming the thing we set out to replace – and, yet, no framework we use would tell us whether we had.

10. What it costs, *and what keeps us here*

FIGURE 13
The trade



Both multi-select, each ranked independently; % of 44. Nineteen of 44 have paid in health or relationships or both.

Time, 70%. Financial security, 45%. Stability, 34%. Health, 27%. Relationships, 27%. Nineteen of forty-four have paid in health or relationships or both. The write-ins add mental health, twice; emotional impact; promotions; and money.

The literature knows about this, in more detail than I expected. Müller (2026) identifies four recurring stressors in social enterprise leaders across multiple countries: work-life imbalance, mission-driven emotional burden, financial precarity, and founder dependency. Brieger et al. (2020) find social-goal entrepreneurs facing compounded financial barriers relative to commercial counterparts. Nikolova et al. (2020) find that involuntary exit from self-employment imposes psychological costs exceeding those of losing a salaried job, with former owners failing to adapt even two years on.

The finding I cannot argue with is Dong et al. (2022), in a paper titled More Prosocial, More Ephemeral? – prosocial motivation decreases work-related wellbeing, which in turn increases exit intention. The thing that brought us here is the thing that wears us out. Most likely due to much of what we've uncovered here.

Mazur (2024) makes a related and more uncomfortable argument about environmental activists: burnout arising partly from the frustrated desire for social power, which she argues is inherent to activism rather than externally caused.

There is a counterweight. Stephan et al. (2022), meta-analysing 94 studies across 82 countries, find entrepreneurship can enhance wellbeing depending on component and context. Brieger et al. (2020) find that believing your organisation creates social value predicts higher job satisfaction and lower burnout, mediated by perceived meaningfulness. Lerman et al. (2020) distinguish challenge stressors, which improve performance, from hindrance stressors, which harm wellbeing – not all strain drives attrition.

What it gave us:

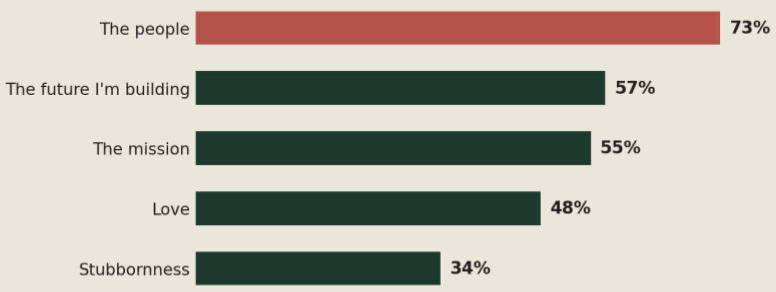
- purpose 84%
- a sense of alignment 73%

- courage 61%
- community 59%
- clarity 52%.

That is a near-perfect inversion of the cost. It’s the material traded for the meaningful. And yes, I am very aware of how ‘romantic’ that sounds. It is also a labour-conditions question. An ecosystem that depends on people accepting purpose in lieu of financial security and health has an attrition problem it has not costed. The literature and our survey says the bill does indeed arrive.

FIGURE 14

What keeps us going when the system makes it hard



Multi-select; % of 44. The mission is not what sustains us.

Here’s the insight: the mission is not what sustains us. People are. And the literature agrees in a way I found genuinely moving: Conner et al. (2023), studying youth activists, find a sense of belonging to an activist community emerging as a significant protective factor for mental health, physical health and flourishing. Kruse et al. (2023) find personality, work design, external support and social impact clustering as resources for social entrepreneurs' mental wellbeing. Müller (2026) recommends mentoring networks, blended finance and mental health provision to safeguard founder resilience.

Whatever makes this work survivable is relational, not ideological. That is the somewhat quiet finding underneath everything else here, and it is the one I would build on next. Over my career I have been sustained by a network of incredible people all over the world, often, but not exclusively, by those outside my immediate employment. They have become my go to and the equivalent of my ‘daily vitamin’.

11. Where we are probably wrong

A paper written from inside a group should say where the group's account of itself is least trustworthy. I present seven candidates for review, one of which is a fault in my own question design:

The flattering option

Seventy-five per cent of us adapt without compromising core principles. Nobody would tick anything else. Read against Bruder's (2025) practice drift, some proportion of that 75% is describing erosion it cannot see. I cannot tell you which of us, and most probably neither can we.

Legacy at 11%

Only five of forty-four define success as personal legacy. That is either genuine self-effacement or the social undesirability of admitting ambition – in a survey sent by someone the respondents know. Sastre-Castillo et al. (2015) do find low self-enhancement in this population, which supports the charitable reading. I'd be minded to be cautious here.

The cost data may be inflated in the same direction

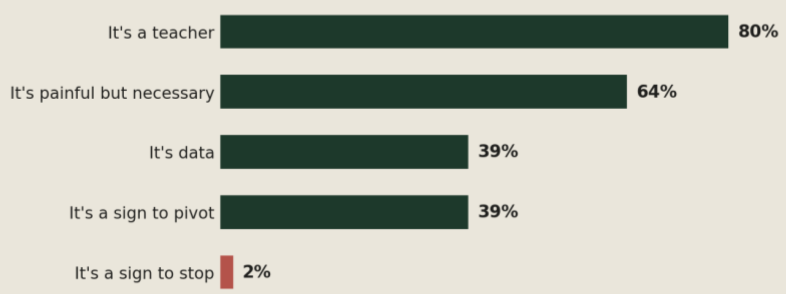
Reporting that the work took your health is not a neutral disclosure among peers; it carries status. The literature corroborates the pattern, which helps, but our specific percentages should not be treated as measurements.

One person in forty-four thinks failure can mean stop

Eighty per cent of us say failure is a teacher, 64% that it is painful but necessary. Persistence is the trait we are proudest of and it is also, at that ratio, an inability to recognise a stop signal. A field that cannot conclude something should end accumulates zombie projects and exhausted people. Delladio and Caputo (2024) review burnout in entrepreneurship; Müller (2026) describes burnout as sometimes prompting organisational redesign. We may be systematically converting our worst failure mode into a virtue.

FIGURE 16

How we relate to failure



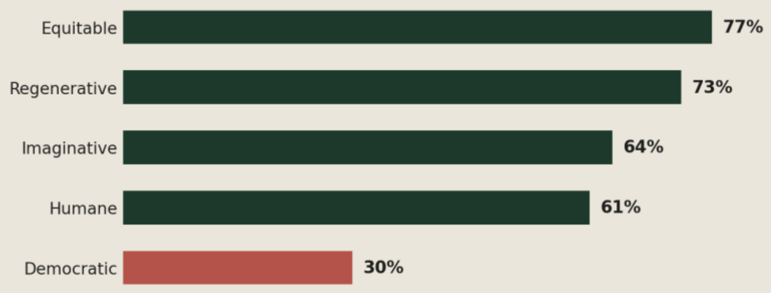
Multi-select; % of 44. One respondent in forty-four allows that failure might ever be a reason to stop.

Democratic at 30%

We want a future that is equitable (77%), regenerative (73%), imaginative (64%) and humane (61%). Democratic trails by thirty points, in a group where 84% want power transparent and 77% want it stewarded rather than owned. Either we care about outcomes more than process, or we have quietly concluded that democratic process is not delivering. Both readings are uncomfortable for a movement that speaks the language of participation, and I do not think we have noticed the tension.

FIGURE 15

The future we are trying to make real



Multi-select; % of 44. Democratic trails by thirty points, in a group where 84% want power transparent.

My own question was ambiguous

I asked how people measure what matters without saying whose measurement I meant or what I meant by matters. Some will have answered about their organisation's reporting; some about their own private judgement; most, I suspect, about both at once. That ambiguity is mine, not theirs, and it is the reason Section 9 makes a narrower claim than the numbers might appear to support. It also means I cannot say with confidence whether our result replicates the existing literature on measurement practice or describes something different, because I may not have measured the same thing.

And the sample is me

Seventy-five per cent UK, one professional network, self-selected, no comparison group, questions I wrote. Homophily will have done work that looks like consensus. The reason I trust the paper at all is that so much of it replicates findings from Brazil, South Africa, Lithuania, Sweden, China, Kenya and Denmark, produced by people with no stake in how we come out.

12. What I would want researched

There are three research questions that come from this, in order of how tractable they appear to me.

Does agreeableness fall over the course of a mission-driven career?

The trait literature's own summary names the near-absence of within-person longitudinal work as its most striking gap, and Cao et al. (2022) call explicitly for pre- and post-venture measurement. Our unlearning data suggests a specific, directional hypothesis, and the three-way disagreement between the social entrepreneurship profile (high agreeableness), the general entrepreneurial profile (low agreeableness) and our own accounts (falling agreeableness) is exactly the kind of contradiction a repeated-measures design resolves. López-Núñez et al. (2020) would be the finding to test against.

Why do the institutional metrics not carry practitioners' confidence?

Institutional measurement is in place across this group and is not, on these answers, where their conviction comes from. Seventy-two per cent locate their proudest contribution in shifts in thinking, which no framework captures because none measures systemic change. A properly designed study would separate what I could not: organisational reporting practice on one side, personal judgement on the other, and the relationship between them. It bears directly on the live regulation being development around the world, and on whether the disclosure architecture now being built measures the thing we care about the most.

Does individual positioning predict organisational drift?

Mission drift is well studied as an organisational outcome and well theorised as a governance problem. What the searches did not surface is work connecting the individual leader's stated posture toward incumbent systems to what subsequently happens to the organisation. Conditional assimilation is a measurable position. Practice drift (Bruder, 2025) is a measurable outcome. This natural experiment already exists in the number of impact firms acquired by mainstream financial and other institutions over the past decade.

A fourth, smaller, and useful to somebody: the ownership literature maps legal vehicles thoroughly and founder decision-making barely at all. Two-thirds of us are still choosing. Somebody should study how.

None of this needs a bigger version of my survey. It needs an organisational psychologist, a sustainable finance researcher, and a sampling frame that does not begin with one person's address book.

13. What we know, *and what I am asking for*

I set out to find whether some of the people I recognise have anything in common beyond agreement. They do, and more useful than I expected.

Four things I think we now know

We were formed without sponsorship. Forty-five per cent of us date our sense of being out of step to childhood, and 16% name a mentor. The literature describes early socialisation into this work; we describe having worked it out alone. If that holds beyond this sample, then the field's quiet assumption that the next generation will be brought through by the current one is resting on a mechanism that does not appear in our accounts of ourselves. Building it deliberately would be cheap and is not currently anybody's job. But also recognising that it's our values that drive us to this work. So supporting those to better understand what they care about and why is as important.

Our ethics have outrun our structures, and that is not a failure of nerve. Eighty-four per cent want power transparent; two-thirds are still working out what legal form should hold it. I had read that as a decade of institutional development we had failed to do. The ownership research says otherwise: no single model reliably preserves mission, and the choice depends on succession context, jurisdiction and tolerance for rigidity. Two-thirds of us are not hesitating. We are tracking a genuine indeterminacy. What the sector owes that group is not necessarily another case for steward-ownership but the comparative decision support nobody has built to enable stronger, more effective governance across a range of models.

The thing we most value is the thing no framework measures. Twenty-four per cent of us say we observe rather than measure; 72% locate our proudest work in shifts in thinking. I want to be careful about that pair, because my question did not separate organisational reporting from personal judgement, and this group measures a great deal, much of it mandatory. What the answers describe is not an absence of metrics but a gap between them and where conviction actually sits. No framework in current use measures systemic change, so the contribution most of us are proudest of has no instrument attached to it. That is not a private matter for practitioners. It lands directly on the disclosure and ratings architecture now being constructed globally, which is being built on the assumption that what it measures is what matters. That's not to dismiss any of it. It's to say we need to be mindful of what we really need to measure.

And our chosen strategy carries a risk we are not managing. Nine per cent of us reject the mainstream; three-quarters adapt rather than confront. Conditional assimilation is a defensible position, arrived at independently by people who concluded that leaving achieves nothing. But practice drift erodes without announcing itself, every one of us reports adapting without compromising, and some of us are therefore wrong. Conviction is not the safeguard, because conviction is universal here. The safeguard is a board with the authority to say no and a written account, made in advance, of what would count as having drifted. That is a document any of us could write this quarter, and almost none of us have.

One thing I would ask us to sit with

What sustains this work is people, at 73%, not mission, at 55%. It has cost 70% of us time, 45% financial security, and 27% each health and relationships. We are proud of a persistence so complete that one respondent in forty-four allows that failure might ever be a reason to stop.

Read together, those numbers describe a group whose endurance is real, whose costs are borne privately, and whose support is informal and unfunded.

If we are serious about the long horizons we claim – seven generations, future generations, the model others can replicate – then the sustainability of the very people doing the work is not a soft adjacent concern. It is the binding constraint.

And what I am asking for

This is a portrait of forty-four people in a professional network, mostly British, mostly in finance. It cannot speak for a category and does not try to. Everything above is offered as a finding about a community and a hypothesis about anyone else.

So, the invitation is not for agreement. Three questions here are precise enough to test properly, and I would like them tested: whether agreeableness falls across the course of a mission-driven career; why expert, well-resourced practitioners stop measuring, and what they would measure instead; and whether an individual leader's stated posture toward incumbent systems predicts what later becomes of their organisation. Testing them needs researchers, and a sampling frame that does not begin with my address book (and a few friends of friends) and the good will of those who have a little time to adventure with me.

It also needs practitioners this survey could not reach – outside the UK, outside finance, and at the earlier career stages where the unlearning we describe is presumably still under way. The most valuable thing that could happen to these findings is for somebody to complicate them.

If you recognise yourself in this paper, or you research people like us, or you have read it and think we have this wrong – that is the conversation I am after. Please do get in touch.

Coda: what we were told, *and what we would say*

The survey closed with two open questions. These are in the respondents' own words, drawn from those who consented to attribution. Not all are included here given the volume I received. Those that are included were selected randomly.

The best advice we were given

> *"As you start to walk on the way, the way appears."*
>
> *"It's a marathon for seven generations, not your personal sprint."*
>
> *"Everything that now is was at one time thought impossible."*
>
> *"If you work really hard for twenty years then you too can be an overnight success."*
>
> *"You can be the most intelligent and capable person in the room, but if your heart isn't in it you are wasting too much precious energy – your own, and that of others who matter."*
>
> *"Treasure your integrity."*
>
> *"If you want to understand someone, observe how they are around three things. It will tell you what you need to know. Children. Animals. Money."*

What we would say to those coming next

> *"Never forget to look after yourself. Your wellbeing is your core limiting factor."*
>
> *"Be like nature. Keep an open mind, be prepared to flex and adapt, build your ecosystem."*
>
> *"If you're not asking for favours so often that it makes you feel uncomfortable, you're not asking for enough favours."*
>
> *"Slow down. Take your time to observe and understand. Be bold but gentle."*
>
> *"Ignore the status quo. Ignore your competitors. Just focus on what you want to achieve. It's okay to imagine a wildly different and better future."*
>
> *"Make your grandchildren proud."*
>
> *"Being a leader in sustainability means holding your ground when the tide turns."*
>
> *"Be kind. Everyone is fighting a battle no-one else knows about."*

Sixteen per cent of us had a mentor. Reading these, I think we have all been quietly trying to become the thing we did not have.

• ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi there,

I trained as a climate and soil scientist at Reading, then took postgraduate studies in environmental policy, law and economics at Southampton. My early career was in the real economy – brownfield regeneration, contaminated land, socio-economic impact assessment. At Ernst & Young and then PwC I worked with global financial institutions on environmental risk in venture capital and private equity, with UNEP FI on the first sustainable finance frameworks, and on the earliest iterations of carbon trading.

I then led sustainability inside two of the world's most recognisable institutions: as Head of Corporate Responsibility at Microsoft UK, and as Senior Vice President for Corporate Sustainability at Bank of America across EMEA and APAC. At the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) I advised high-net-worth donors, corporations and philanthropic families – building the connective tissue between private capital and social purpose that, with the experience from Bank of America, would later inform Tribe.

Ten years ago, I ideated and co-founded Tribe Impact Capital, now one of the world's leading impact wealth managers and a certified B Corporation. The reason was simple: clients who wanted to move money in line with their values had no home, and the system had no purpose beyond accumulation and control. Tribe's first design principle was to be everything the system was not. In April 2026 I moved to Non-Executive Director and Strategic Advisor.

Alongside all of it, and for over eighteen years, I have had a parallel career in governance – not background experience but a second track. I serve as a Global Board Trustee at ClientEarth and Co-Chair of B Lab UK, having previously sat on the boards of The Blue Cross, Big Issue Invest, and The Prince's Initiative for Mature Enterprise. I also sit on the Global Steering Group of the Global Ethical Finance Initiative and advise Greenheart Consulting.

What I have learned across all of these adventures is that governance done well is not compliance. It is culture, power, trust and long-term resilience, held in structure. That authenticity is a calling card few forget. That integrity binds for life and will, inevitably, make you unpopular quite a lot of the time. And that doing what is right is never the same as doing what is easy.

I am, unavoidably, one of the forty-four represented here and part of a larger, and growing community of people built for and building the edge. That is the reason I can write this short paper as much as the reason to why I wrote it.

Thank you for reading this. Please do share with those you feel would be interested, especially the community of future leaders out there.

Amy

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● WITH THANKS

The forty-four

This paper exists because forty-four people gave their time, their candour and, in several cases, answers that cost them something to write. The overwhelming majority of them were asked hard questions by someone they know, which makes honesty harder rather than easier, and they were honest anyway.

Where their words appear in the text, it is with their explicit permission. Where they do not, the thinking is theirs all the same. Named below are those who agreed to be identified; the remainder contributed on the same terms and are no less present in these pages.

Holly Arnold
Thomas Bourne
Emma Howard Boyd
Charlotte (Charlie) Bronks
Shelley Chapman
Anuradha Chugh
David Connor
Yann Demont
Adrian Ferraro
Steph French
Emily Harris
Victoria Hoskins
Victoria Hurth
Justin Johnson
Anna Jones
Susan Kay
Dr Gary Kenneth Kendall
Geoff Kendall
Thom Kenrick
Klara Kozlov
Ingrid Kukuljan
George Latham
Rebecca Lewis
Paul Lindley
Matt Longley
Suresh Mistry
Charlotte O'Leary
Leena Al Olaimy
Hedda Pahlson-Moller
Champa Patel
Simon Pickard
Martin Rich
Will Richardson
Emma Schofield
Kristin Siegel
Will Snell
Drew Tulchin
Juliet Valdinger
Rachel Wanyoike
Joanna Yarrow

My thanks must also to the wider community of people building the edge, many of whom will recognise themselves in these pages without ever having filled in the form. Literature searches were conducted using Consensus (consensus.app).

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• ANNEX

The survey instrument

The full set of questions put to respondents, in the order they were asked. Questions marked "select all that apply" were deliberately multi-select, so that respondents could record the full constellation of drivers rather than a single modal answer. Questions marked "select one" forced a choice, and are the questions where priority rather than presence is the point. Every question also offered a free-text "other" option, which a substantial minority used throughout.

Respondents were additionally asked for their name, role, industry and region, and two consent questions – whether they were content to be named as a contributor, and whether specific answers could be attributed to them.

1.1 When did you first realise you didn't think like the people around you?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Childhood – I always felt slightly out of step
- Adolescence – the moment I started questioning norms
- Early career – when I saw how systems really worked
- Later in life – after a catalytic event or failure
- I don't think I'm "different"; I just see things clearly
- Other

1.2 What pushed you toward the edge?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Curiosity
- Frustration with the status quo
- A sense of responsibility
- A personal experience of injustice or harm
- A mentor or early influence
- Other

2.1 What problem in the world refuses to leave you alone?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Climate and ecological breakdown
- Inequality and exclusion
- Broken economic models
- Governance and power concentration
- Cultural or narrative stagnation
- Other

2.2 What drives your work?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Protecting something fragile
- Repairing something broken
- Reimagining something outdated
- Creating something that doesn't exist yet
- Proving a different way is possible
- Other

3.1 What form of resistance have you encountered most?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Institutional bureaucracy
- Investor pressure to compromise
- Cultural scepticism or ridicule
- Regulatory constraints

- Internal team resistance
- Other

3.2 How do you typically respond to pushback?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- I double down
- I adapt without compromising core principles
- I find a workaround
- I slow down and rethink
- I walk away if the cost is too high
- Other

4.1 What guides your decision-making when the path is unclear?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- First principles
- Mission integrity
- Long-term impact
- Stakeholder wellbeing
- Gut instinct
- Other

4.2 What does "success" look like for you?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Systemic change
- Cultural influence
- A resilient, values-aligned organisation
- A model others can replicate
- Personal legacy
- Other

5.1 How do you relate to failure?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- It's data
- It's a teacher
- It's painful but necessary
- It's a sign to pivot
- It's a sign to stop
- Other

5.2 What have you had to unlearn?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Perfectionism
- Speed over depth
- Traditional leadership norms
- Extractive business logic
- People-pleasing
- Other

6.1 How do you think about power in your organisation?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- It should be distributed
- It should be transparent
- It should be earned
- It should be stewarded, not owned
- It should be shared with those affected
- Other

6.2 What ownership model feels most aligned with your values?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Steward-ownership
- Cooperative or community ownership
- Founder-controlled with strong guardrails
- Traditional ownership with mission locks
- I'm still exploring
- Other

7.1 How do you relate to the idea of becoming "mainstream"?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- I reject it – the mainstream should become us
- I'm indifferent – I care about impact, not labels
- I want influence, but not assimilation
- I want scale, but not at the cost of integrity
- I'm actively trying to shift the mainstream
- Other

7.2 What would it take for the mainstream to become you?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Better narratives
- Better incentives
- Better ownership models
- Better governance
- Better imagination
- Other

8.1 What future are you trying to make real?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Regenerative
- Equitable
- Democratic
- Humane
- Imaginative
- Other

8.2 What are you building that you may never see completed?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- A new model
- A new culture
- A new market
- A new movement
- A new story
- Other

9.1 What do people most misunderstand about you?

SELECT ONE

- My intensity
- My optimism
- My standards
- My pace
- My refusal to compromise
- Other

9.2 What do you hold sacred?

SELECT ONE

- Integrity

- Truth
- Beauty
- Justice
- Community
- Other

C1. What has this work taken from you?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Time
- Stability
- Financial security
- Relationships
- Health
- Other

C2. What has it given you?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- Purpose
- Community
- Clarity
- Courage
- A sense of alignment
- Other

C3. What keeps you going when the system makes it hard?

SELECT ALL THAT APPLY

- The mission
- The people
- The future I'm building
- Stubbornness
- Love
- Other

A1. What ownership model best expresses your values?

SELECT ONE

- Cooperative or community ownership
- Hybrid models (e.g., dual-class with mission locks)
- Perpetual purpose trust
- Steward-ownership
- Traditional ownership with strong governance
- Other

A2. What is your primary goal for ownership?

SELECT ONE

- Community accountability
- Founder liquidity without mission drift
- Intergenerational stewardship
- Long-term independence
- Mission protection
- Other

A3. Who should your organisation ultimately be accountable to?

SELECT ONE

- Community
- Customers
- Future generations
- Planet

- Workers
- Other

B1. How do you measure what matters?

SELECT ONE

- Custom metrics aligned to mission
- I don’t measure – I observe
- Long-term ecological or social indicators
- Narrative and cultural influence
- Stakeholder feedback
- Other

B2. What impact are you proudest of that no one sees?

SELECT ONE

- Avoided harm
- Community trust
- Internal culture
- Quiet repair
- Shifts in thinking
- Other

B3. What harm are you actively trying to avoid?

SELECT ONE

- Burnout
- Extraction
- Greenwashing / purpose-washing
- Inequality
- Replicating old power structures
- Other

What is the best piece of advice you were ever given?

FREE TEXT

What is the best piece of advice you want to give future leaders?

FREE TEXT