



# The man who could save the world


AS RECIPIENT OF A NOBEL PEACE PRIZE FOR HIS CONTRIBUTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVITIES, AL GORE IS ON A NON-STOP MISSION TO CHANGE BUSINESS PRACTICES FOREVER. BUT ARE YOU LISTENING?

**“I am Al Gore,** I used to be the next president of the United States of America – I don't think that's funny.” This is Al Gore's opening gambit; a sincere apology from a democratic heavyweight and committed environmental activist who really doesn't need any introduction on the world stage. With a wink of the eye and his effortless nature to nurture, he is both humorous yet humble, seeking out any way to make the world a better place for tomorrow. But Albert, as his campaigning mother Pauline used to call him, has laid the 2000 US presidential election fiasco to rest – after winning the popular vote by approximately 500,000 votes, he ultimately lost the electoral college to Republican candidate George W Bush – and has since then concentrated on stimulating climate change. No longer bound by policies and politicians, his Nobel Peace Prize winning labours have taken him further than any presidency ever could. And he has only just got started: his current tangible aim is to promote environmental leadership.

“Business is now coming to grips with sustainable development and specifically with the issue of global warming,” says Gore, offering advice to UAE and Gulf business leaders. “It's different in different regions but international companies are facing pressure from Europe, North

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America and Asia. All around the world this issue is increasing in importance and businesses are finding that their customers want to patronise organisations that take the issue seriously and have decided to become part of the solution, instead of being part of the problem.”

Of particular note, Gore is impressed with the leadership qualities being shown from such diverse economic entities as the communist corridors of Beijing and the capitalistic shopping aisles of America's biggest retailer Walmart. Gone are the days when Chairman Mao Tse Tung slavishly enforced his strict and controversial agrarian policies; the People's Republic is lead by Hu Jintao, a man with a very clear environmental vision for the country's economic future. By contrast, in 

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the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Walmart had hundreds of staff members affected and was compelled to undergo a process of change that led it to make the disaster one of the hallmarks of the company's vision for the future. "Today, every single one of its sub-contractors, every business it buys, has to certify that they have taken environmental sustainability into account in the way they do business," Gore says.

"Whether you think that government regulations or global treaties or customer demand or your own conscience is the motivating factor, there is a powerful emerging movement by business leaders to become part of the solution for this crisis," he continues. "The good news is that business leaders who decide they want to make positive steps in today's economy are finding far more often than not that they can save money and become more profitable by doing so."

As far as Al Gore is concerned, however, there is no longer any excuse to shy away from the changing business world: leaders, who update their company vision and become compatible with changing environmental demands, will make their employees feel better, make their customers feel better and enhance their brand. "When businesses look at ways to reduce CO2 emissions and become more efficient," he declares adamantly, "they automatically begin to see opportunities to use far more effective and efficient technologies and approaches to business. There are literally thousands of examples."

Naturally, however, there remains a fiscal challenge and even a man with so many political connections – Gore was even considered to run on a double ticket with Barack Obama in the 2008 US elections – appreciates that there is a major obstacle to making this shift. Be it in business, politics or in the media, today's society has seen the emergence of a short term focus and immediacy that was never prevalent in previous generations.

"This is probably best exemplified by the quarterly earnings report that businesses are slave to these days," explains Gore, a heavy investor in green technology himself. "It's unfortunate: in the US, 35 years ago the average holding period for stocks was more than six years – now it's less than six months. Basic finance teaches us that 75 to 80 percent of a company's value builds up over seven or eight years. So if

a business wants to make a commitment to be part of this sustainability movement, it may well involve making some investments to change technology – investments that won't necessarily pay for themselves in the next 90 days. If it's a public company and institutional investors see an unsatisfactory quarterly report then they can penalise that company very harshly."

It's a complex Catch-22. Worse still, best practice is hampered by the fact that any eco-sensitive business plan will need to find some way to convince both the sources of finance and gain trust from investors to hang in for the long term while adjustments are made. But Al Gore, who is famous for "putting his money where his mouth is", is remaining positive in the face of his detractors. As the founder and chair of the Alliance for Climate Protection he will not be swayed so easily. "There is an old African proverb that says if you want to go quickly go alone; if you want to go far go together," he concludes. "We have to go far quickly, which means we have to have a vision be true to the right values and set some goals to begin sharply reducing global warming pollution."

When spoken without even a hint of predictable Washington rhetoric, who could refuse the rally cry of Al Gore and his growing legion of environmental converts? As he himself campaigns as reason enough for hope, "political will is in itself a renewable resource". But sometimes, for those who choose not to listen, that is just another inconvenient truth. ♣

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