From Sustainable to Generative

The next word in business — and why now

Picture a boardroom in 1972. A manager says the company should become a "sustainable business." The room laughs. *Sustainable?* That word belongs to forestry manuals, not quarterly strategy.

Now picture almost any boardroom today. Sustainability sits on the website, in the investor deck, in the annual report. What was once a punchline is now a baseline — so ordinary that a company *without* a sustainability story looks careless.

So how did a word travel from the margins of ecology into the core language of business? And can we see the next journey coming?

Sustainability started somewhere unexpected. In 1713, a Saxon mining administrator named Hans Carl von Carlowitz, facing a timber shortage, wrote down a simple rule: cut no more wood than the forest can regrow. He called it *Nachhaltigkeit* — sustainability. For two and a half centuries it stayed a technical idea about limits, owned by foresters and scientists. The concept existed. The category "sustainable business" did not.

A definition set it loose. In 1987, the UN's Brundtland Report gave sustainability a sentence clean enough to travel: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Suddenly the idea could move — into universities, boardrooms, and eventually everyone's vocabulary. Frameworks followed: the triple bottom line (1994), CSR, ESG (2004). Business schools taught it. Consultancies sold it. And the phrase completed a familiar arc — *unusual, then a differentiator, then table stakes.*

But sustainability has a ceiling built into the word. To *sustain* means to keep going — to hold the line, put back exactly what you took, leave the world no worse. Net-zero. In a world already thinned of trust, opportunity,

and ecological health, “no worse” starts to look like a floor we mistook for a destination. What if a business could do more than avoid subtracting? What if, by design, it *added?*

That word is generative. To be generative means to bring forth — new value, new capacity, new life. Applied to business:

> **Generative business is an abundance-based company designed to give more than it takes — compounding value, trust, and flourishing for employees, customers, communities, and owners.**

Where extractive takes value out and sustainable keeps things from getting worse, generative actively creates more — leaving people and place more alive than it found them. Its Brundtland mirror says it in one line:

> **Generative business meets the needs of the present while expanding the capacity of future generations to create their own.**

Sustainability *preserves* the future’s ability to meet needs. Generative *expands* the future’s ability to create. That single flip — from *meet* to *create* — is the whole shift.

We are at the 1972 moment for this word. “Generative business” is not yet everywhere, which means the category is still open — and the people who show up early don’t just adopt it, they get to author it. In a decade it could feel as normal as “sustainable” does today. So use it now — in how you describe your company, your strategy, your public commitments. You name the better future in plain, present terms, and keep naming it until enough people can see it too. Then it’s simply real.

Sustainability proved a word can move the world. *Generative* is the next word. Let’s be the ones who say it first.

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