

Episode 6: Bill Wehl Why employees are key for a hopeful future

Yesh ([00:00](#)):

For those tackling climate change, Bill Wehl was in an enviable spot. He spent more than a decade as the former Sustainability Czar, at both Google and Facebook, where he successfully helped to reduce the carbon footprint of these behemoths. For an environmentalist, it was a dream job, but there were still nights when Bill couldn't sleep. He was acutely aware that humankind was staring down a climate catastrophe and there was a narrowing window to avoid the worst effects. He was haunted by a burning question: how could he create more change, faster? Watching the success of the LGBTQ human rights movement sparked an idea. He left his cushy job in Silicon Valley and in February, 2020, he created "Climate Voice". The idea behind Climate Voice was to empower employees of any company to be agents of change. He wanted them to speak up, put the pressure on their employers to not only make internal changes, but to support public policies to fight climate change. Bill knows it will be a lengthy battle and he's looking for foot soldiers. I'm Yesh Pavlik Slenk, and this is Degrees: real talk about planet-saving careers from Environmental Defense Fund. Bill Wehl, welcome to Degrees.

Bill Wehl ([01:26](#)):

Thanks for having me. It's really a pleasure to be here,

Yesh ([01:30](#)):

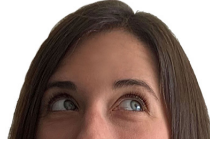
Bill, you were making changes within these tech giants, Google and Facebook. Companies with Sasquatch-sized carbon footprints. Since you're advocating for everyone to clean up their own backyards, right where they work, why didn't you just stay at one of these tech giants to do just that?

Bill Wehl ([01:46](#)):

I think it was hitting the point of realizing that I could continue to make incremental change from within Facebook, for example, and with other companies that we were collaborating with. But it was clear to me that the most important thing we needed was public policy, and that companies had a huge opportunity to help make that policy happening. And they were sitting on the sidelines. And there were many moments where it was clear that's what was going on, but I hit the point in 2017 where it seemed pretty clear that this wasn't going to change quickly and that I could not change it very quickly from the inside. And I did not see outside groups-- including EDF and WWF-- and other major NGOs. I did not see outside groups, pushing companies on this.

Yesh ([02:40](#)):

That's EDF, our organization, Environmental Defense Fund and WWF, the World Wildlife Fund.



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Bill Wehl ([02:46](#)):

I needed to do what I felt was the right thing for the company and for society. I needed that outside pressure and I didn't see it. And that was the moment where I felt like, well, now's the time for me to get out there and help create that outside pressure and raise the bar for companies. And that will make it possible for people in the kind of position I was in to do a lot more from the inside because that outside pressure is there.

Yesh ([03:27](#)):

But there are lots of companies like Google and Facebook that are making changes. In your opinion, where are they falling short? What kind of outside pressure is missing?

Bill Wehl ([03:37](#)):

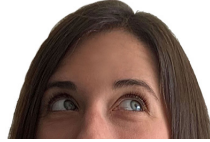
What they haven't done much is really make it a top policy priority for their lobbying. They lobby on taxes. Some of them will be on immigration. They might lobby on trade, on intellectual property. The tech companies lobby on telecommunications, policy and privacy and other things related to the internet. They mostly don't lobby on climate. And the oil companies, the oil and gas companies, fossil fuel industry and their proxies, the U S Chamber of Commerce--mostly the fossil fuel industry controls the agenda of the U S chamber on climate and energy related things-- they are all in on climate, but mostly on the wrong side. And they're very powerful. If you're powerful and you're on the sidelines, that that silence is not neutrality. It's complicity with those who are pushing a negative agenda on climate. We need all of those with power to step up.

Yesh ([04:45](#)):

Well, one of the things I love about climate voice is that it's so aligned with the ethos of Degrees. We want listeners to understand that no matter what job they have or what industry they're in, they can have an impact, but to play devil's advocate for a moment. Do you really think-- really, really think-- say a corporate accountant or a tech support person at a company based in Idaho can change a company's policy?

Bill Wehl ([05:09](#)):

Absolutely. No question. That one person by themselves? It's hard. You know, they're an accountant way down in the organization. They don't have that much influence all by themselves. That person in concert with some other employees and a whole bunch of students, you know, thousands of students who are studying finance and accounting, would be the people the company wants to hire over the next several years? I have heard, I will say, uh, you know, in the last year or two, I have talked to employees at a few companies who have said, I might get fired for this. And you know what that's okay. Because, uh, you know, keeping my job, by being quiet in a way that that actually causes the climate crisis to sort of get



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perpetuated and get worse and worse, um, is not an acceptable trade-off, That's the same thing that companies are doing when they say, well, it's risky to speak up on this political issue because it's been so politicized and polarized. So we don't want to take that political risk. So we're going to stay silent while the other side is not staying silent. when individuals do that, it has the same effect. So I think it's on all of us to find the courage and figure out how to do it in a way that mitigates the risk. There are times when you can ask your company to do things and the answer will be no, not now. Um, and so you're not going to win every time. I think the key is not to do it alone. So part of what we're doing with climate voice is giving people the opportunity to add their voice to now thousands of other people calling on companies broadly to speak up on climate policy.

Yesh ([07:18](#)):

So how exactly does this work? How do you go from being a single person within a company taking a stand, to becoming part of something that leads to fundamental change in policy? It seems like such a huge leap. You've talked about the LGBTQ movement showing us the way forward. Can you explain how that worked?

Bill Wehl ([07:37](#)):

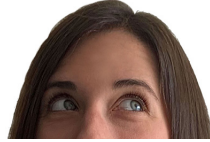
10 years ago, we had hundreds of companies in the U S who were very progressive in their internal policies on LGBT rights, equal benefits for employees in domestic partnerships, other internal policies that promoted equality and, and tried to eliminate or, or reduce discrimination. Companies, you know, sort of jumped to the next rung on the ladder of engagement on that issue and became really strong advocates for social policy, public policy on LGBT rights. The reason they got off the sidelines and spoke up is that employees stood up and said, we care. And it absolutely was, you know, LGBT employees who did this. It was also allies. And it was people in accounting and marketing and every department,

Yesh ([08:52](#)):

One of the big wins for that community was overturning the North Carolina bathroom bill that barred, transgender people from using some bathrooms. How did the business community apply outside pressure to make that happen?

Bill Wehl ([09:04](#)):

You know, in North Carolina, when the bathroom bill passed and Facebook and a whole bunch of other companies that lobbied against it, a bunch of employees starting with, with gay employees said, we're not happy with this. We, you know, we work for Facebook. We want our company to really have our back. And we feel like this is horribly discriminatory. And we want the company to take a very strong stand. And then a bunch of other employees, myself included, stood up as allies and said, we agree. And as a result, the company took a really strong stand and essentially told the state, you need to fix this, or we're done investing in North Carolina. And we had plans to invest, you know, billions of dollars more



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over the next number of years. And that plus a whole bunch of other companies, they stepped up on marriage equality at the state and federal level, um, first at the state, and then ultimately at the federal level. 370 odd companies joined an Amicus brief in the Supreme court case on marriage equality. I mean, it's corporate America broadly stepped up and said, this matters. Here's why it matters to us as employers. And here we've hired some really highly paid brilliant lawyers to craft the constitutional arguments. Explain why it's constitutionally the right thing to, I think that made a difference. I think the same as possible on climate today, we got hundreds of companies who are very progressive on climate in their operations and their supply chain, and they're mostly silent on public policy. And we need to, and we can get them to step up and become really strong advocates for public policy. And they need to hear from employees, not just one, but a bunch doesn't have to be half the employees, but you know, a number and from students that this is what people want to see their companies do

Yesh ([11:05](#)):

Generating this kind of movement from the individual employee to public policy requires so much buy-in from corporate America. You're talking about change starting at the individual level that snowballs, and that takes a tremendous amount of energy and a tremendous amount of time. So when you're looking at the big picture, the big scheme of things, are we moving fast enough?

Bill Wehl ([11:29](#)):

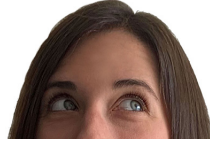
I started working on climate professionally 15 years ago. Every moment has been critical. Unfortunately, every year it's gotten more critical because we haven't been moving fast enough. I imagine many of your listeners know that scientists like to talk in terms of a carbon budget. We've got a bank account with a certain amount of carbon we can. And when we've spent it, um, we keep spending, then where you think it was we're in debt. We are going to blow past the desired targets of limiting warming to one and a half degrees C, or if we don't hit one and a half, you really good to keep it below two, we are spending that carbon budget way too fast. And the IPCC 1.5 degree report from about two years ago, fall 2018, laid out the consequences of allowing warming to exceed two degrees, three degrees, four degrees, even 1.5 degrees. It's, it's really horrific as the, as warming increases.

Yesh ([12:39](#)):

Horrific scary, daunting. Can we get enough public policy traction to scale up fast enough to make a difference?

Bill Wehl ([12:48](#)):

I think the key word you used is scale. And, um, the climate problem is one of the thorniest naughtiest, massive messiest problems. I think that that humanity has ever faced because it's a technical problem. It's an environmental problem. It's a sociological and political problem. If the climate solutions are really expensive, it's going to be very hard to deploy them at scale. Um, but even when they're cheap enough,



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we're not deploying them fast enough. So wind and solar are cost competitive in many parts of the world and still getting cheaper and we're not deploying them fast enough. And the total cost of ownership of an electric vehicle, it was for fleet purposes, if it gets driven a lot, total cost of ownership is cheaper. We're not deploying them fast enough. And the reason is we don't have strong enough public policy to basically guide the entire economy on the decarbonization path we need to. And the reason for that is the political balance of power is completely out of whack. That's what we are working to change.

Yesh ([15:04](#)):

During the past four years, if anything, we've been sliding back. Are you hopeful that we can pick up the pace under a Biden administration?

Bill Wehl ([15:13](#)):

There's no time like the present. You know, I mean, people have often said the best time to act on climate was 10 years ago or 20 years ago. The second best is, is today. Biden and Harris had been really clear climate as one of their top priorities. We know we need to cut emissions dramatically in half, essentially in the next decade. And that means we need to start making major changes now. We don't have five years for people to kind of dance around and try a few things and maybe speak up on a couple of things. This coming year is the time for companies to just decide, let's go all in, you know, it's time to fix climate and get the U S and other countries on the path we need to be on

Yesh ([16:08](#)):

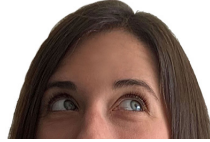
Bill, I'd like to ask you a question I'm asking all of our guests. If you could have a "Bill Wehl personal Board of Directors", folks that inspire and challenge you, people that you look to when you need to make big decisions, I'm curious who would be on your personal Board of Directors?

Bill Wehl ([16:26](#)):

I don't want a board of directors who's going to say bill, you're great. What you're doing is just awesome. I want people to say, you're not doing enough because I think on climate, none of what we're doing is enough. It is too easy to say, this is really hard and we can accomplish this. So let's do this, even though what we need is five or 10 times that. We need to push ourselves and we need people to push us. And that's true on, on just the kind of technical elements of the climate solutions. It's also true on all of the intersecting issues around justice.

Yesh ([16:26](#)):

Any individuals come to mind?



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Bill Wehl ([16:28](#)):

The leaders of the Sunrise Movement: we've got two young people actually on our advisory board. Um, Isha Clarke and Brian Mecinas, who are young people of color, very involved in the environmental justice and racial justice-- justice movement. But without people like that, who, um, who live the experience of having been affected by those systems of oppression every day, without them not just whispering in our ears, but, but, you know, constructively yelling in our years, um, uh, I think it's, you know, it's not my lived experience. So, um, it, it really helps to have people like that.

Yesh ([17:10](#)):

Bill, I can imagine some people in their twenties and thirties listening to us right now and wondering if this is all just too much, how do you push on and how would you encourage them to do the same?

Bill Wehl ([17:22](#)):

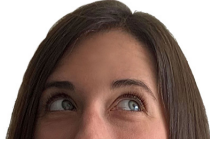
This work is really hard. There's a kind of distancing. You have to create it. I imagine it must be like what a doctor, uh, deals like when they're working with a really sick patient. You know, the patient might die, or be disabled and that's awful. And at the same time, you have to the hope and the, the energy to engage and do what you can. And I feel like it's the same way on climate. There are scenarios that are really dire and scary. There are young people who in their early teens freaked out about climate. And one response to that is, Oh my God, I'm terrified. I'm going to crawl in a hole and ignore it. Um, the other, which I think is, is hard because then you're faced with it every day is to really engage and do everything you can to help guide us toward one of the better scenarios where things are not so bad because we have choices. And I think the worst thing we can all do is say it's hopeless. It's not hopeless. We can create a much better future, or we can allow the future to unfold in a way that's pretty bad. And that's scary, but, you know, the world has always had potentially scary futures and it doesn't always work out perfectly, but we can make it a lot better than it otherwise would've been. And I would argue, we still can create what looks like a really wonderful future, where most people prosper, where the air is cleaner, where the water is cleaner, where the economy is doing well, where people have good jobs, where the climate is safe. We can do that. But we want to, if we all get terrified or just decide, it's not worth it, or can't be done, is it guaranteed to work? No. I've never been the person who, you know, when I have an idea then goes and hypes and say, this, this will fix the world. It's like, this is one thing that's really important among the many other things that we need to do on climate. We still need to be innovating. We still need to be investing. We still need to be working to change people's behavior and change the culture and, and, um, encourage more voluntary action. And we really need, I like to think of it as yes. And it's like improv, right? It's not, there's one magic bullet. It's we need all of this stuff. But the thing that actually can accelerate all of the other things is public policy.

Yesh ([20:35](#)):

Well, Bill Wehl, I want to thank you so much for being with me here today.

Degrees

WITH YESH PAVLIK SLENK



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Bill ([20:41](#)):

It's been a real pleasure. Thank you.

Yesh ([20:44](#)):

And that's our show for today. Thank you listeners for tuning in to Degrees. For more about how Bill Weihl is working to get companies to push harder for policies that combat climate change, see our show notes. If our message resonates with you--and we really hope it does-- please share this podcast with a friend and ask them to subscribe. That is the best way to support our show. Please write a review and give us a five-star rating on Apple podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen. And follow me on Twitter @yeshsays. We're online at degreespodcast.org, that's degreespodcast.o-r-g. We'd love to hear your thoughts and your questions about the show. Degrees is presented by Environmental Defense Fund. Our producers are Rick Velleu and Amy Morse. Our executive producer is Christina Mestre. Our production company is Podcast Allies, with Elaine Appleton Grant and Lindsey O'Connor. Our editor is Karen Lowe. Engineering by Matthew Simonson and theme music by Lake Street Dive. Tune into our next conversation with Trish Kenlon, who has made a career of helping other people find careers in the field of sustainability. I'm your host, Yesh Pavlik Slenk. Stay fired up, y'all.