Three Lessons Learned From Aspen
The first half of the 2015 Ideas Festival is in the books. Here’s what we have learned so far:

The Aspen Ideas Festival is, as always, a celebration of an immense collection of questions, possibilities and solutions. But over the course of the Festival’s first four days, speakers at Aspen have repeatedly discussed three major themes that, regardless of field or focus, are essential to understanding some of the world’s biggest challenges.

1. Stay Positive, Act Holistically

Even though a large number of people think that the United States is not heading in the right direction, the concept of the American Dream is alive and well. 72% of Americans say they are living or believe they will live the American Dream — including nearly eight in ten young people — according to new survey data from Burson-Marsteller, *The Atlantic*, and the Aspen Institute. This optimism has several positive effects, such as an increased dedication to philanthropic causes.

“More people are giving, and more people are giving more,” explained Ann Limberg, head of philanthropic solutions for U.S. Trust, who also noted that today’s philanthropy has “become far more strategic, measured with a focus on transparency and measuring impact.”
The conversations this week are about not only grabbing the low-hanging fruit, but also applying high impact solutions that fix both the branches and the stem of societal issues. The key, though, is how. “What is the intention and obstacle?” posed Oscar-winning screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, outlining his ideal approach. “Once you find those, you can do the fun stuff.”

Rip Rapson, President and CEO of The Kresge Foundation, told attendees that cross-sector engagement and a collective agreement on priorities is key. “Increasingly, all sectors are at the table figuring out who can do what,” Rapson said, describing how this collaborative approach is already working to revitalize places like Detroit.

2. Women and Millennials are Emerging

In the world of business, it’s a no brainer: placing women in leadership positions is a proven strategy for success. Research revealed during a session on impact investing showed that corporations with three or more women on their board outperform those with no women on their board by 53% return on equity.

“If we unleash the power of women, the world is going to change,” explained Joseph Quinlan, Managing Director and Chief Market Strategist at U.S. Trust.

But it’s not only about work. According to studies, 75% of female executives are the primary care giver for a child, while 40% care for an aging relative. Sharing these important duties will further enable women to apply their leadership skills to the businesses that power the world.

The Millennial generation is similarly positioned to make a big impact on American bottom lines. “A strengthening economy and high levels of education are putting Millennials on a path to prosperity,” according to Beth Ann Bovino, the U.S. Chief Economist for Standard & Poor's Ratings Services.

But not all youth have the same opportunities.

“So often, young people are seen as problems to be solved rather than problem solvers,” noted Craig Kielburger, Co-Founder of Me to We.

3. The Private Sector Must Adapt

"The nature of work — the notion that people work one career, a 9-to-5 — is fundamentally changing," said Senator Mark Warner (D-VA).

But that doesn’t mean the private sector won’t be a major driver of impactful change.

That effort starts, as United States Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez notes, with a shift in the way we think about doing business. “It is a false choice that you either take care of your
shareholder, your worker, or your customer,” said Perez. “Effective companies do all three; they know it’s not a zero-sum game.”

For businesses, authentically addressing the needs of customers will provide them with the opportunity to serve them in new and exciting ways. “How are we going to inspire our customers?” explained Ramón Baez, CIO of Hewlett Packard. “We can inspire them to think about how they can be the disruptor, not the disruptee.”

It’s not too late to get involved in these important conversations. We encourage you to join in:

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