BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR IMPACT

For organisations to drive real change, they must treat impact as a strategic commitment and reshape internal structures to support it.

In a time where organisations are increasingly expected to demonstrate their value to society, leaders need to create the conditions to make impact visible and credible. Drawing on his tenure as President and CEO of RAND Corporation (2011-2022), Michael Rich offers insights on the principles and challenges of leading an impact-centric organisation.

RAND is well-known in Asia but not always well understood. How would you describe it?

RAND is a non-profit and nonpartisan research institution dedicated to ensuring that the most important policy problems are addressed with the best possible evidence. Its mission statement is straightforward: to help improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis. It performs policy analysis and technical assistance for numerous public-sector and philanthropic clients globally; operates a fully accredited graduate school; and maintains an independent, self-initiated research programme funded with donations and other discretionary resources. Its core values are quality, or rigour, and objectivity, reinforced by detailed and transparent standards that guide its research and analysis. RAND's research products are made available online for the general public, which is a practice the organisation has long maintained.

When you became president in 2011, after a quarter-century in other senior leadership positions, you made increasing the impact of RAND's research your overarching priority. Why?

As I read the RAND mission statement, it contains a means and an end. Research was the means; impact was the end. In other words, research was what RAND did, but it wasn't why RAND existed. We had long been outstanding in meeting the specific objectives of individual projects, but the research often fell short of achieving its maximum possible impact. Sometimes the reasons were beyond our control, but not always. I thought that there was more we both could and should do.

When you were leading RAND, making impact more explicit was not simply a communications decision—it was a strategic and managerial one. What does it actually mean, in practice, for an executive to put "impact" on the leadership agenda?

Making impact a strategic priority means embedding it in decision-making, governance procedures and human-capital management policies—not treating it as a communications exercise. It means asking:

What difference is our work making, for whom and how do we know? That translates into adjusting incentives, aligning resources, investing in required new capabilities and ensuring the organisation's formal structures, informal networks and external partnerships are all guided by the same overarching mission-driven priority.

In complex organisations, not everything that matters can be measured. Where did you find leadership judgment mattered most—especially when evidence was incomplete, impacts were indirect or time horizons were long?

Many dimensions of an organisation's performance can be measured quantitatively, and others can be described qualitatively. But the most consequential shifts—especially those tied to significant long-term strategy changes—rarely show up clearly in early data.

The hardest question is whether the organisation's overall orientation is truly changing in line with a new strategic direction. That generally requires aspirations, priorities, structures and behaviours to evolve together. Orchestrating that evolution is where leadership judgment matters most. But, early signals are often indirect, subtle and incomplete: changes in decision-making patterns, in how resources are allocated, in what people prioritise and talk about in the background and aspirations of new employees. In those moments, leadership judgment is critical—interpreting weak signals, assessing whether behaviours and decisions are genuinely evolving and determining if the organisation is moving in the intended direction or merely complying at a surface level.

RAND's shift toward becoming more impact-centric unfolded over more than a decade. Looking back, what were the hardest change-management challenges—cultural, professional or incentive-related—and what lessons do they hold for leaders trying to steer long-horizon change today?

The hardest challenge was initiating and sustaining change without the forcing function of a crisis. In the absence of urgency, we had to answer—again and again—"Why this shift?" We linked the move toward impact not to fashion or external pressure, but to mission and long-term relevance. That required consistent leadership messaging, reinforced by visible alignment in resource allocation, promotion decisions and strategic investments. Words alone would not have sufficed.

A second challenge was uneven readiness. For some parts of the organisation, becoming more impact-oriented required modest refinement; for others, it demanded a fundamental shift in mindset, capabilities and incentives. That meant investing in new skills, tools and professional development—and exercising more patience than I initially expected.

Finally, we had to reconsider how we defined and assessed progress. Not every dimension of impact or institutional transformation lends itself to precise measurement. We learned to balance rigour with realism—using quantitative metrics where appropriate, while also valuing qualitative evidence and credible interim indicators. And, we learned not to inadvertently devalue important achievements that, while short of ultimate impact, represent important enabling steps to that impact, such as an innovative methodological breakthrough.

The broader lesson is that durability matters more than drama in embedding change into the fabric of an organisation.

Executives often worry that emphasising impact can lead to instrumentalism or pressure to show results prematurely. As a leader, how did you think about protecting rigour and credibility while still pushing the organisation to be outward-facing and influential?

I've always understood the tension, but I've never really seen impact and rigour as opposing forces. At an organisation like RAND, impact that isn't grounded in quality, strong methods and objectivity just doesn't last—and can actually do harm. Our influence flows from our credibility. If we weaken that, we weaken everything.

So for me, the issue was never choosing between impact and rigour. It was figuring out how to integrate them thoughtfully. Rigour was non-negotiable—our research standards, peer review, transparency and analytic independence stayed firmly in place. At the same time, we pushed ourselves to think more deliberately about audience and timing: Who needs this work? When does it matter most? How do we make it accessible and useful without diluting the evidence or masking risks and uncertainties?

We tried to be clear about what the evidence shows—and what it doesn't. We saw impact as something that builds over time through measured contributions, not splashy headlines.

In the end, rigour wasn't a constraint on being more focused on impact; it was what made that possible. By staying anchored in our core values, we could expand our reach and relevance without compromising what makes the work useful and credible in the first place.

You helped bring the concept of "truth decay" into public conversation—highlighting declining trust in facts, expertise and institutions. More than a decade on, how has that challenge evolved, and why does it matter even more for leaders operating in the Age of Impact?

One reason I chose the term "truth decay," rather than referring to a "post-truth era" or "post-fact era," is that those phrases imply a fixed end state—as though society had crossed a threshold and could go no further. "Truth decay" captures something more dynamic and corrosive: an ongoing erosion of the role of facts, data and analysis in public life.

The core features of "truth decay" we identified more than a decade ago—the blurring of fact and opinion, the growing volume and influence of opinion over evidence, declining trust in institutions and deepening disagreement about data and scientific consensus—remain very much with us. In many respects, they have intensified, particularly with the rapid rise of AI-generated content that can amplify misinformation at scale. At the same time, progress in addressing the structural drivers of these trends has been limited.

That evolution matters profoundly. Impact depends on the ability to anchor decisions in shared facts, credible analysis and constructive debate. When the information environment is fragmented and trust is fragile, even the most rigorous work can struggle to gain traction. It becomes harder to conduct civil discourse, build durable coalitions and sustain the broad public support necessary to tackle complex, long-term challenges.

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In this sense, truth decay raises the bar for organisations committed to evidence and impact. Producing high-quality analysis is no longer sufficient. Leaders must also reinforce norms of transparency, methodological rigour and institutional integrity to re-earn public trust. In an era where confidence in expertise cannot be assumed, credibility is not simply a virtue—it is a strategic imperative.

What should leaders in Asia take from the RAND experience and where should they resist importing models developed in Western political, institutional or funding contexts?

Some leadership fundamentals translate well across regions: a clear and compelling mission statement, widely embraced core values, a culture of teamwork and peer review and a commitment to transparency that invites external scrutiny. These have been central to building institutional credibility and earning the trust of decision-makers across the political spectrum in the countries where we operate.

However, models developed in Western political and funding environments reflect specific institutional assumptions—about governance, regulation, philanthropy and public accountability—that do not always hold elsewhere. Importing them wholesale can create misalignment or unintended friction.

The more reliable approach is to adapt principles, not replicate structures. Leaders in Asia are best positioned to interpret what will resonate within their own political, cultural and institutional contexts.

If you were advising today's CEOs, university presidents or public-sector leaders embarking on an impact agenda, what is the most common leadership mistake you would warn them against—and what would you urge them to focus on instead?

The most common mistake is treating a focus on impact as a communications strategy rather than a strategic commitment. Positioning an organisation around impact is not a branding exercise; it is a directional choice that should reshape priorities, resource allocation, incentives and talent.

That shift requires meaningful adaptation—often the development of new capabilities, new partnerships and new ways of gauging success. It may also require letting go of activities that no longer align with the mission. Without those operational changes, "impact" risks becoming a slogan rather than a standard.

Real impact grows from clarity of purpose, disciplined execution and credibility earned over time. Storytelling has its place—but it should reflect substance, not substitute for it. AMI