

# Top Ten Takeaways from Climate Week

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**Teneo convened Chief Sustainability Officers (CSOs) and other industry leaders in New York for our firm’s annual Climate Week event. This year, the gathering was co-hosted by Pia Heidenmark Cook, a Teneo Senior Advisor, and Kensey Biggs, a Senior Managing Director and Teneo’s Head of U.S. Corporate ESG.<sup>1</sup>**

Held under Chatham House Rules, guests engaged in a candid dialogue on the state of sustainability and the corporate landscape overall. Below are some takeaways.

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<sup>1</sup> Teneo uses the terms “sustainability” and “ESG” interchangeably, following SASB’s FSA guidelines.



## 1. A Net Positive Attitude

Despite the current pushback, attendees at ~1,000 events during Climate Week NYC (CWNYC) were overall optimistic about the future of sustainability. Many CWNYC attendees we spoke to emphasized how they are continuing the path forward to meet their previously established sustainability goals, and they encouraged others to do the same.

In addition, the sentiment of guests at Teneo's event was largely positive, which was consistent with what we often hear from clients—although leadership teams are talking less about sustainability, many leaders continue to execute on their long-term plans. Presenters on the main stage at the Javits Center also shared this net positive attitude.

## 2. Ambition Meets Pragmatism: Reinforcing the Business Case

Many company leaders are tailoring how they frame sustainability to focus more on the business case for it (e.g., resiliency, efficiencies, customer demand, long-term value). For some companies, initiatives that were once an afterthought are now central to business operations, whether through integrating nature restoration into supply chains or designing more sustainable products.

In certain cases, over the past few years, companies made investments up front for the low-carbon transition that were so significant in size and scale that it is not prudent to unwind those efforts now.

Overall, we noted more discussions on how companies are increasing their investments in technology to create sustainable solutions that are both innovative and profitable. This signaled a more pragmatic and opportunity-driven approach than last year.

## 3. Revisiting Long-Term Sustainability Goals

Despite many organizations keeping their long-term plans, some corporate leaders are reassessing sustainability commitments to ensure alignment with evolving regulations and compliance requirements.

For companies where C-suite members decided to modify or scale back previous goals, it is critical to carefully consider how to communicate these changes. The same applies to companies whose leaders have chosen to increase their focus on certain ambitions, despite the current landscape. From footnotes in sustainability reports to press releases, many options exist, and each company must determine what is best for them.

Some guests said they know of companies where leaders are re-setting aspirational sustainability goals to reflect what is within their control versus what is determined by external forces.

## 4. The Importance of Language: Strategy over Words

“ESG” and “sustainability” are words, not strategies. Companies are being more deliberate in their word choices to ensure their messaging resonates with diverse audiences—from customers to policymakers—and clearly aligns with their business strategies.

Many organizations are swapping in clearer terms, like “resilience” or “impact,” to craft corporate narratives that resonate broadly with stakeholders and align with business strategy. In some cases, we

have observed companies going back to words that were previously more common in this industry, such as “corporate responsibility.”

## 5. Public Education on Sustainability

Some guests lamented that many sustainability-related headlines today are dramatic and controversial—and unfortunately not always factual—as certain reporters and other groups are more focused on clicks than accuracy. This led to a discussion on the need for sustainability education for a wide range of stakeholders, from politicians to employees to board members to customers.

The widespread misinformation about what ESG actually represents can be disheartening. ESG is not about politics, values, or pushing viewpoints or specific agendas. Instead, it is a set of non-financial information and metrics that investors can use to gain a more robust understanding of a company, beyond financial metrics alone.



## 6. ISSB: The Future of Sustainability Reporting

With shifting regulatory frameworks in both the U.S. and EU, there was less discussion this year on the burdens of mandatory ESG reporting.

Importantly, despite headlines and an evolving geopolitical landscape, the accelerated global adoption of the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) framework continues—with 38 countries / jurisdictions adopting it. This represents ~60% of global GDP. (California’s law on reporting climate risks and mitigation also recognizes ISSB.) Further, countries are not postponing ISSB implementation, as some articles suggest; only Canada has.

Guests from prominent U.S. public companies expressed support for ISSB reporting, noting the single materiality of its framework and the organization’s goal to reduce complexity and cost. Countries that adopt ISSB into law, as well as regions with voluntary disclosures only (like the U.S.), can use it. Jurisdictions can also customize the framework as needed—from assurance to materiality requirements.

## 7. Tightened Budgets, but Sustained Momentum

Although some companies’ sustainability budgets have shifted due to market conditions and evolving expectations, these changes do not signal a retreat in overall efforts. Some guests said that while their overall ESG budgets may have changed, their companies’ level of investment in sustainability remains the same.

Organizations are becoming more focused on how they spend—often continuing decarbonization plans, promoting circularity and tapping into sustainable finance. CSOs expressed that future efforts will require

a higher degree of intentionality in stakeholder interactions, as well as more partnerships, to drive collective action.

## 8. Nature Continues to Rise on the Corporate Radar

Many companies are prioritizing nature as a strategic imperative and doubling down on related initiatives. The business case includes brand resiliency, efficiency gains and increased affordability.

Regarding nature, one guest noted that risk management, growth and return on capital are themes that echo across sectors, as those in industries tied to natural systems recognize the potential financial consequences of failing to protect and restore nature.

In many cases, these pressures are amplified by stakeholder expectations and public-private partnerships.

## 9. AI and Innovation: Unlocking the Next Frontier

Artificial intelligence, cloud platforms and integrated systems are becoming essential tools for executing sustainability at scale. For example, some companies plan to reduce emissions by not only adding batteries but also incorporating AI to predict optimal times to charge based on usage data.

Others are using quantification projects to transform abstract sustainability goals into measurable, tangible business value and more precise forecasting.

## 10. CSOs? Or ABCDEFG-Os?

The Chief Sustainability Officer role has changed significantly since 2020. CSOs are now expected to be experts across multiple areas—communications, reputation, legal, risk, finance and procurement, to name a few. For example, there are rapidly evolving ESG-related regulations, risks associated with sustainability communications, potential efficiency gains during implementation, supply chain impacts, financing incentives tied to program performance and climate risk to consider.

The role is not siloed; it requires acting as a translator between technical sustainability initiatives and the core business functions across a company that drive profitability.





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