

Lessons from Macmillan's CEO on Leading Through Change Without Losing Your Why

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As someone who regularly speaks with CEOs about their industries, paths and philosophies, my conversation with Jon Yaged, CEO of Macmillan, stood out. It wasn't just about books or publishing – it was about values, culture and the role of business leaders in a time of social friction.

What surprised me wasn't Jon's passion for literature – that was expected – but how candidly he spoke about the challenges Macmillan faces in a world where books are being banned.

Book banning may sound like a relic, but as Jon explained, it's a growing issue. Schools and libraries across the country are under pressure to remove books that address race, gender and identity. For Macmillan, one of the "Big Five" U.S. publishers, this isn't just a sales issue – it's cultural and political. Jon made it clear: their role isn't to publish what's comfortable, but what's important. And that comes with risk, especially when distributors, schools or local governments push back.

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We also discussed what it means to be a CEO amid cultural pushback. Jon doesn't take a performative approach. He doesn't try to be loud or overly polished about Macmillan's values. Instead, he focuses on listening, standing firm and partnering

with those who share their mission. That kind of clarity stood out. Leadership isn't always about fighting loud battles – sometimes it's about quietly protecting space for discourse, with conviction.

Our conversation turned to AI and its impact on publishing. Jon's view was pragmatic: use AI to streamline operations, improve accessibility and support editors – not replace them. He wasn't overly optimistic or alarmist – he simply saw AI as a tool that needs thoughtful handling. For an industry often seen as traditional, Macmillan appears forward-looking – without losing its editorial soul.

There's something here for leaders in any industry. Jon is navigating a company at the intersection of culture, politics and innovation. He's not leading with fear or distraction – he's leading with clarity. What's the mission? Who are we serving? Where can we evolve without compromising our principles? Those are questions worth asking, whether you're in publishing or running a tech startup.

What I took from this interview was a deeper understanding of how leadership and culture intersect. Jon Yaged isn't trying to make a spectacle of Macmillan's stance – he's working to keep the lights on for writers and stories that matter. And in a time when polarization and noise dominate, that quiet resolve made a lasting impression.

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