The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

Get To Know Our Guest
DR. SAMAN SARBAZVATAN

Prof. Saman works at the intersection of *Technology, Education, and Business, driving Digital & Responsible Innovation and Transformation*. As the *COO and Vice Dean of Ecole des Ponts Business School of ecole nationale des ponts et chaussées (ENPC) and Founding Director of ReTech Center*, he is a global thought leader helping entrepreneurs, executives, and decision makers navigate the Responsible Transition toward *Industry 5.0*.

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

✦ ## HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **KG:** You've had such an interesting career since 2000 in technology, in academia and business, how do you interconnect these domains and what drives you through all of this?

- **DR. SAMAN:** Since I was riding the tip of a very nice wave of technological transformation that I was lucky, of course, but that's how this store was remained open. *You get to the point that, you would like to get engaged with more organizational and leadership aspects beyond the technology as a tool, as an enabler, but rather in terms of how decisions are made organizationally and everything else.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *As you're working in technology, you're always using all the tools that you're very much informed about the reality of things, whether it be, metrics and measures for sustainability or socioeconomic, sort of implications of digital transformation up to governance and leadership aspects, which are very, very broad. So that's the way that I carved my way through was through the convergence of digital transformation with the responsible transition, which includes sustainability, circular economy, ESG, SDGs, and all the elements of responsible transition.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *I'm actually really lucky because what we do here, especially at this school, working with executives, that's very enriching for me personally, but also for the work that we do. You know, with our community of alumni and participants. Because that is how we make sense of things. We bring something more meaningful than just studying or getting a degree or investing in something just for financial growth. We really look beyond that because we have that common interest and that's the value that gathers us all around what we do collectively.*

- **KG:** *How would you describe ethics and integrity in your context of the digitally empowered responsible transformation?*

The Human Conversation
Podcast Newsletter

✦ HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** *This from retrospective to foresight driven sort of ethics is one very important pillar that I can share. The other could be like the move from rule-based compliance to value aligned design in which, the move from as seen as external rules or legal requirements to be followed, this move from that side to the internalized sort of purpose-driven design that we have for our businesses and economies. Again, the angle is the desirable emerging futures, where organizations align the operations and supply chains and technologies and business models all around an embedded sort of ethics and integrity.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** We can also think about from a binary trade between right and wrong to navigating like tensions and paradoxes and trade-offs because now the economies and markets that we engage with today increasingly are interconnected and over complex.

- **KG:** *Are you noticing any pattern, as you're working with corporates and companies tackling the very cutting edge of technology? Are you noticing one particular stream more relevant to companies over the others as they're thinking about responsible technology?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** Like the retrospective one to foresight driven and, embedding ethics and integrity into foresight. Industry leaders and also purpose-driven innovators that understand the implications of this digitally empowered economy that must be responsible because digital transformation is not going to slow down and every day we see more innovative ways of integrating technology in our personal professional lives.

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

- **DR. SAMAN:** *These forces are coming together, those who are leading markets and industries and those innovators who are shaping the emerging futures of markets and societies, they work with it very directly. Those who are more receiving the consequences of this shift from rule-based compliance to value-aligned design. Those are companies who integrate ethics and integrity in the operation and leadership structures of not only their own organizations, but also they provide the tools for others as well to do so.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The one that about like from binary ethics to the complex tradeoffs, this is mostly I think well perceived and understood by all those who are engaging with the digital economy either directly or they are impacted by the shifts in the digital economy and also they interact with socioeconomic, socio-environmental dimension of their industry which means that they have a more sort of proactive engagement with their stakeholders either through investors and policy makers or through users and partners and clients.*

- **KG:** *What's your observation with Big Tech and how do you work with them to create that vision you have for a responsible future and ethical future in technology?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** The pressure is there and that's one of the drivers of this transition to the responsible economy. So *the driver for the digital transformation is of course competitiveness. There are many drivers for digital transformation like driving innovation, remaining competitiveness. But for the responsible transition, the pressure is coming from stakeholders, from policy and regulatory bodies, from investors, from consumers, from partners.*

HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** *These pressures are very productive and of course they sort of push our markets and industries towards a more responsible sort of way of leveraging the capital and their assets. So what happens is that now increasingly we are collaborating with international organizations from businesses to government bodies.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *So I think for me, it's like you need to embrace this pressure that comes. Of course, it's not easy, especially for larger organizations, like this is like a very strong competitive advantage for startups because you work on the cultural dimensions and a lot around change management and transformation.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The whole dynamic that is created around this move towards the digitally empowered responsible economy is making it very interesting to watch. Of course, it's like watching a dance floor. You get bored if you don't dance. So those who don't want to engage with the change, they won't enjoy it as much as those who are engaging with the change and transformation either receiving or, providing services and by any means that they can, they do something.*

- **KG:** *Do you have any perspective or take you want to share on those kinds of environments where digital transformation is inevitable and it's going to be everywhere? Some states perhaps are not there yet in terms of capability to partner well and to monitor and then delegating governance. Would you share some perspectives or advice on such environments?*

- *DR. SAMAN:* If you contrast like this model of delegating governance versus too much of centralization as we see in advanced economies, which mostly are not yet at the capacity that they could be, *the common element in both models that is contributing to this inefficiency, is the gap of skills. It's the gap of skills that touches all domains, like gap of skills in leadership and governance by itself, gap of skills.*

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** *Why does it matter? Because now moving forward, it's like the digitally empowered responsible transition requires our leadership and governance models to reflect both the digital transformation what can be done with it, what are their impacts, how would it change the way we do things and also the responsible transition like for example, depending on the region but generally speaking like circular economy and SDGs and SDGs.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *This skills, the gap of skills in leadership and governance, the gap of skills in technology, operational aspects of the responsible transition like sustainable practices, regenerative practices, like all industries, from fashion, agriculture, energy, manufacturing, of course, all of them are impacted.*

- **KG:** *Have you come across any examples where perhaps they come close to what you're describing in either model and they're doing it well?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** One of the contributions that we have is with the European Commission's community of practice of Industry 5.0 which ReTech Center is an official member of and there with other partners under the leadership of the EU Commission *we drive practical aspects of the transition to Industry 5.0, is sustainability and technology together. So they represent a good role model for driving this.* The EU Commission by itself is a great example.

- **KG:** *Have you had a personal experience where you had to navigate a difficult ethical dilemma?* I'm curious about how such experiences have shaped your own approach moving forward because you're so deeply involved in creating a sustainable ethical future. *Would you have an example you'd like to share?*

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

✦ **HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS**

- **DR. SAMAN:** *When I was working on more hands-on sort of keyboard as we say. It was, we knew the potentials of the market. We could see the potentials of the market because we were developing solutions. And over time you start thinking about the socioeconomic and socio-environmental value of what is being you know, sort of delivered, sold, bought, you know. And then, you start questioning like, how else could it be done? How could it, you know, technology can be great tool? Why not focusing more on like enabling aspects of it rather than just driving the financial gains?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *I have to step up and if I believe that something can be done and if I know how to do it, I need to share it and academia is a great platform to share.*

- **KG:** *Did you face any hurdles in making your vision come true? That it's not just the economic drivers around profitability, but we could think about a sustainable future too.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** The type of challenges and hurdles that I observed and worked with. So I brought them together and did a bit of research as well again with expert practitioners and with decision makers. I created a risk and readiness matrix which is, which reflects the, all the elements of success and failure of organizations.

- **KG:** *What are your observations on the real life ethical dilemmas most relevant today? And what is your advice to professionals grappling with such situations?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** Lack of ethical frameworks is something that is seen on the surface, but in reality, it's like a deficit in anticipatory capacity building. It's like ecosystem awareness and the alignment between operations and the values and the systems that we are trying to escape.

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

⭐ HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** For the sake of putting them in points like one would be AI and autonomy versus the human agency. Of course, the values that we talk about, creativity, for example, human dignity, accountability. And of course, because AI is increasingly taking over decision-making, there's the tension for optimizing for efficiency or better value and preserving and valuing more human dignity, rights, accountability.

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The core of Industry 5.0 is human centric. The term refers to human inclusive design. Not necessarily to put humans at the center and design everything for humans, but to make sure that humans are at the center of decision making and enhancing technology.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The second one would be digital ownership versus data exploitation. The line between value creation and value extraction is very thin because of the wide variety of possibilities that we can innovate in operational, economic and business model.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *Number three is of course like short-term innovation versus long-term responsible innovation.* Startups and corporates are often pressed to scale fast without thoroughly considering the unintended consequences of short-sighted sort of innovation or short-term innovation, such as exclusion, course, resource depletion, ecological degradation, and of course, lot on the human side of things when it comes to human rights.

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

- **DR. SAMAN:** *It's about a shift from ethical decision-making to ethical foresight. Which means that instead of focusing on the decision-making itself, we don't wait for ethical crises to arise, build mechanisms for anticipating the dilemmas and challenges before they materialize.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *Foresight driven innovation, which requires of course interdisciplinary thinking, know, sort of a stakeholder engagement, multi-stakeholder engagement, scenario-based reflection, you know, early in the life cycle of the innovation. So that's how we can shift from focusing on decision-making itself to having an ethical foresight that would bring us the capacity to address the ethical dilemmas when they arise.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** Now that we talked about capabilities and also foresight, *this doesn't happen unless we can manage to see and redefine success through responsible value creation. This means moving beyond the KPIs that are profit-driven, built on economic modeling of sort of not sustainable or eroding sort of economic models.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *Every professional, decision makers, executives, innovators, investors, policymakers, we all must ask like, whose future is being designed? Wh*o benefits? Who bears the cost? And who's designing those features?

- **DR. SAMAN:** *We can redefine success through responsible value creation.*

HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **KG:** *Traditionally, there has been resistance to move from shareholder, short-term profit incentivization to more circular, inclusive thinking and stakeholder prioritization. How are you persuading the corporate partners you advise to do these two things, embedding integrity as a systemic capability and responsible value creation. Do you encounter resistance? And if you do, how do you help them overcome that in their mind?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** The target audience with whom I would have this type of conversation are those who, first of all, they know what they don't know. And they understand the implications of ignoring the unfolding frontiers of businesses, markets, and society at the intersection of the digital transformation and the responsible trend.

- **DR. SAMAN:** *How do you convince me to do this? Well, I don't need to convince you because at this stage we're talking about competitiveness for those who are the like Avant-premier. Those who understand, those who realize and value foresight, which is digitally empowered and responsible.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *Focusing on resilience and looking at this question from the perspective of resilience is that if we do not embed integrity as a systemic capability, it means that we are reactive, responding reactively and decide on decision-making.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The shift from ethical decision-making to ethical foresight. Whereas if we have embedded them, if we have embedded integrity, because we have had ethical foresight, then the systemic capability is much more resilient and also much more competitive.*

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

- **DR. SAMAN:** The new measures, metrics and indicators that we need to use to understand ***what is the unfolding frontier of success, impact, engagement, leadership, governance, competitiveness, foresight design, business modeling, operational design, storytelling, marketing and branding.*** It's a matrix that looks into this and says, now for you as an executive investor, innovator, policymaker, decision maker, you now need to understand that what is coming up is as the both sides, it's like success in terms of digital integration and leveraging all the prowess of technology, if you like, in boosting your performance and everything else, good. But if you don't have the responsible side covered as strongly, you're not competitive because those who manage to do that, manage to drive the responsible transition through digital transformation, those will be more competitive and more adapted to the upcoming trends of markets and what stakeholders would value.

- **DR. SAMAN:** *For the first one, that shift is about resilience. For the second one, embedding integrity as a semi-capability is about competitiveness and redefining success through responsible value creation is just validity and to being able to be valid still in terms of value proposition, economic modeling as a business and the upcoming markets.*

- **KG:** *It's not about how do you convince anyone do the right thing, you're pointing out that if you do not, if any executive, any leader does not do the right thing now, embed integrity as system capability, refocus on responsible value creation, then you simply cannot keep up with innovation at the pace it's going.*

- *KG: Earlier in this conversation, we had touched upon it, that you believe public-private partnerships are the way to go because governments sometimes are not equipped. Do you have a comment on this latest trend?*

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** *I think we have to step back in terms of questioning whether it's the right thing to do or not, or why do we have to do this, trying to have, take sides.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *It's like if we zoom on something on a higher level, which is Governance, we need digital governance, that's normal. But maybe we need to look deeper into governance itself because it needs to be governed. We need to be able to have traceability. And that's non-negotiable because first of all, technically it's possible.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *How do we make this governance more responsible and also more connected to stakeholders? So sort of a multi-stakeholder governance model that we go to. And this would be where tokenized economic modeling comes into play.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** We have many of those successful governance systems, in closed systems, in more controlled environments. At enterprise level, for example, they're very strong, very successful ethical responsibility and all that. When it comes to a broader sort of hope, it needs to be analyzed, understood, and also understood in terms of the ecosystemic interdependencies of different elements that would be involved in the governance modeling and governance system. Those would need to be understood, studied, and driven collectively forward.

- **KG:** *You mentioned that every year at ReTech Center, you pick two topics. What topics that you pick this year 2025?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *We had social value creation using blockchain and distributed ledger technologies with branding and storytelling of fashion products, with art we had, with space manufacturing we had. Smart cities and cognitive cities and the role of AI and immersive technologies and blockchain.*

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** *So at ReTech Center, we have re-tech diplomacy. In terms of it's the same thing, but it's like looking into things from the angle of digitally empowered responsible economy.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The shift is in value systems and the transition takes steps. In governance also, we see in smaller states, some countries are stronger, some industries are stronger. But of course, as you know, there are many ecosystems that are completely legal.*

- **KG:** *Can you share more about the ReTech Center and how executives can engage with its various initiatives?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *I put like a structure of four labs, the RISE labs, research, innovation, skills, and engagement. When I thought about it was because as I worked with the public sector in terms of research and innovation and the private sector, I saw the facility of addressing the challenges that we have from these four sort of gateways or perspectives is much more efficient and more engaging.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** At ReTech Center, we help incubators and accelerators in order to help them push up the standards, increase their efficiency and their impact as well. And the return on the funds that they engage, return on investment, you can call it, but it's broader than that. So we help them by various means.

- **DR. SAMAN:** The reason to have the four labs, of course, because all these, *they create a flywheel effect and they drive, accelerate research, they accelerate innovation, they accelerate skills and engagement and implementation,* but they also nurture each other and they, it's the only way that I could find to interconnect the sort of the topics and disciplines that I was working on, which are now represented as the Retex specialization matrix.

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

✦ HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **DR. SAMAN:** *ReTech specialization matrix, which is the matrix that has more than 35 specializations in terms of topics, such as AI and robotics, space, fashion, energy, agriculture. So these are like industry vectors.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The strong point is the entry points when we talk about skills. One red thread that was not mentioned is the gap of skill. Because if you think about capacity building, it's about skill.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *If you don't know what you don't know and you don't know that, so you completely ignore this type of conversations, then it's obvious where that institution or individual is heading to.*

- **DR. SAMAN:** *The idea is that when we upskill and reskill, then we understand what we don't know and we try to understand them better. So we get to know what we don't know. And that's where upskilling and reskilling really feeds and nurtures capacity building, resilience, foresight capacity, innovation capacity.*

- **KG:** *Are there one or two that you want to particularly call out because either you sense an urgent need in the market and you want to say here you need help, we can help you or are there particular industries you want to focus on for this year and next year?*

- **DR. SAMAN:** Well, our focus is across all the specialization matrix, but what we receive in terms of requests for support and let's say in fashion, in health, in space, we are seeing increasingly both the public and private sector sort of interests that are being highlighted.

- **DR. SAMAN:** *Get here to explore, to develop, to advance, to innovate, to fund, to invest, and to drive with a strong community that is global what the future holds. That's what we are trying to understand and design together. That's like enhancing today and enabling the emerging desirable futures that we want.*

The Human Conversation

Podcast Newsletter

REFERENCES & LINKS

- DR. SAMAN's LinkedIN/Website page
  LINKEDIN
  École des Ponts Business School
  ReTech Center

- The Human Conversation Podcast Channels
  APPLE PODCASTS
  SPOTIFY