

# Sustainability leader and ASU alum honored for transforming business with a people-first approach

## WM President and CEO Jim Fish named W. P. Carey School of Business 2025 Executive of the Year

By Molly Loonam, ASU News  
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Long before Jim Fish ('86 BS in accountancy) became president and CEO of WM — formally Waste Management — in 2016, he recognized that the higher he climbed the corporate ladder, the greater the impact he could have on his community.

"My goal is to help WM's more than 61,000 employees feel good about working for this company, feel that their mission and job matters, and feel that our leadership values their opinions," Fish said during a special [Economic Club of Phoenix](#) event where he was honored as the W. P. Carey School of Business 2025 [Executive of the Year](#).

"Our people-first philosophy is not just a couple of words on a page — it's truly what I believe."

Under Fish's leadership, WM has emerged as a leader in sustainability, becoming a leading environmental solutions provider and the largest recycler in North America. The organization has received [multiple honors](#) for its green and employee-centered initiatives, including being named one of the world's most ethical companies by Ethisphere.

W. P. Carey Charles J. Robel Dean [Ohad Kadan](#) introduced Fish at the ceremony and reflected on meeting him for the first time last year.

"Here's what impressed me: He has been extremely successful — no doubt he brought WM to performance levels that were unseen — but beyond that, it was clear that he stayed true to his values, his family, and he stayed loyal and committed to his employees," Kadan said.

Fish is the 42nd leader to receive the award for contributions to the business community. To commemorate the award, Kadan sat down with Fish for a fireside chat where Fish shared anecdotes on leadership, his legacy and the WM Phoenix Open's impact on the company.

**Question: Can you elaborate on WM's mission to maximize resource value while minimizing environmental impact so the economy and the environment can thrive?**

**Fish:** We are aging — the average age of the American population in 1980 was 30, as opposed to the average age today, which is 40 — and as our population ages, we must take health care and sustainability into consideration. As we continue to consume the world's resources, being better stewards of those resources must be part of our mission.

That sustainability must be environmentally and economically green because we're not doing this for practice but to make money. WM exists because shareholders give us that privilege, and we have to make money for those shareholders.

So, we see our mission as being multipronged. Certainly, making money for shareholders is important, but so is thinking sustainably about preserving resources. As the biggest recycler in North America, becoming more sustainable in ways such as adding renewable natural gas to our sustainability platform and rebuilding our recycled plants is critically important. Our goal is to be the most sustainable company in North America, yet it must be profitable for us.

**Q: When we spoke previously, you mentioned that your employees are your stakeholders. Can you expand on that?**

**Fish:** The idea that employees are a company's stakeholders and customers originated with Herb Kelleher, founder of Southwest Airlines. In his book, "Nuts!: Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success," Kelleher suggested that, to be successful, leaders should prioritize their employees first because if an organization's people feel valued, included, and that their opinions and jobs matter, they will stay longer and be happier, which, in turn, make shareholders happier. This method has been effective for us: Our shareholders are happy.

While I read Kelleher's book and thought his idea made sense, I inherited this "people first" mindset from my mother. She never spoke about caring for others, but that's what she did. When we were kids, my mother visited residents at nursing homes who had no other visitors. I believe she lengthened the lives of some of the women she visited. So, my mom taught me — and it's something I've carried forward at WM — to forget about the company for a moment and remember that we're all people. We all have needs and wants. My goal at every job I've ever had is to do something for the people, and that comes from my mom. Her goal was to do well by others.

**Q: What attracted you to join WM?**

**Fish:** I needed a job! I was laid off from a Yellow Corporation subsidiary on Christmas Eve. Previously, while working at America West Airlines, I'd met a man named Maury Myers, who became CEO of Waste Management. He invited me to move back to Houston and work for WM 24 years ago, and I've enjoyed every day.

**Q: How did a Texas native become an ASU student?**

**Fish:** I had a nontraditional experience at ASU. When I first came to Arizona to pursue my degree, I contracted Valley fever, which turned into coccidioidal meningitis. I ended up in the hospital for six weeks, followed by 200 spinal tap treatments over two years.

Before becoming ill, I had been active in recreational sports but wasn't able to do much after contracting meningitis. I had treatments three times a week at Scottsdale Memorial Hospital, which knocked me out for the entire day.

My parents helped me reach out to ASU to inquire about classes. Since I couldn't function several days a week, ASU sent teaching assistants to my apartment to give me accounting, finance and statistics classes. I couldn't imagine a big, fantastic university doing this! But, for that time, many of my credits were earned thanks to these teaching assistants. That's how I was able to earn my degree.

**Q: What role has the WM Phoenix Open played for you as CEO of this company?**

**Fish:** Sponsoring the open has been a bigger lift for our brand than anything we could have imagined. Last year, I visited Japan to meet with investors, and their first question was: "Tell us about the Waste Management Open." We have been trying to change our name from Waste Management to WM because it doesn't make sense to be a sustainability company with the word "waste" in our name. So we've been working on changing that, and the first place we changed it was the golf tournament.

We've been the title sponsor for 16 years, 13 of which have been zero waste. That was big for us to establish because it showed our customers we could lead sustainability in big cities. It's been tremendous for us, and I suspect we will be the title sponsor for a long time.

**Q: Looking back at your career at WM, what is your most prominent success or achievement?**

**Fish:** I had been in this role for six months when I attended the 2017 WasteExpo, and someone asked what I wanted my legacy to be. The investors expected me to say we should produce double-digit returns or increase WM's stock price by a certain amount. But I said I wanted my legacy to be that people say, "Jim made this a great place to work."

My greatest accomplishment is that I've been at least partially successful (in making WM a great place to work). Overall, I think people like working for WM. It has a collegial atmosphere, people enjoy what they do, and they contribute to our society. That has been my greatest contribution.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



WM President and CEO Jim Fish (left) and Ohad Kadan, dean of ASU's W. P. Carey School of Business, pose for a photo during a special Economic Club of Phoenix event where Fish was honored as the W. P. Carey School of Business 2025 Executive of the Year. Photo courtesy of W. Scott Mitchell

## Text image(s)



Jim Fish (left) and Ohad Kadan at the Economic Club of Phoenix event. Photo courtesy of W. Scott Mitchell