

INTRODUCTION

I spent so long building a company that I believed in, one that was involved in social impact and volunteer work. But in an instant, everything changed.

In the spring 2020, we were in the early stages of the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The U.S. border shut down, and overnight, our markets collapsed. Within 60 days, I had laid off half of my team.

Rationally, I understood that the business could only support people's salaries with customers. I was disheartened letting go of the people who had given their hearts and minds to make the business a success. It was a series of hard days (and nights) to see my employees and their families left without the futures I had promised them.

I was one of the so-called “lucky” ones. I sat at the executive table for the company that had acquired us the previous year, contributing to a fast and immediate pivot, positioning the company and our message to help organizations overcome communication barriers caused by social distancing. Our strategic pivot was an extension of our existing capabilities, which enabled us to preserve and enhance the value of our solutions.

Against this success, I was tasked with negotiating exits, breaking agreements, and signing settlements. It was heart wrenching work. I was so conflicted by my role of leading the ramp-down of operations of my company while leading the ramp-up of marketing and communications for the new company. The darkness starts when you begin to think about what could have been.

During this tumultuous time, I felt anger, guilt, and profound sadness. I wept in my home office after delivering more layoffs on Zoom. I felt guilty for having a seat at the table. Before the first summer of the pandemic, I laid off almost everyone. These were my people. These were people I cared for and loved. Each of them, with their unique talent, abilities, gifts, and skills, were never coming back.

The company's focus on profits over people was all wrong. In executive meetings, I would talk about fulfilling our purpose and gaining alignment across the organization, but everything was all about hitting our EBITDA targets.

That focus didn't sit right with me, and I found myself becoming unattached from my identity—like I no longer had purpose and meaning, and that I had no value to offer. The waves of self-loathing and depression came crashing down.

When I was enduring those feelings, I felt so alone.

I shared my frustrations with my wife, and she reminded me of gratitude. Early in our relationship, we read *The Last Lecture* by Randy Paus in bed every night before we went to sleep. Randy shares his last lecture in the book, the final legacy he wanted to leave behind for his children after being diagnosed with terminal cancer. We laughed, cried, and talked about Randy's words, going through the experience of Randy's book with gratitude for the small moments we often overlook.

In *The Last Lecture*, Randy writes, "Showing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most powerful things humans can do for each other." So, at my wife's request, I began practicing gratitude to move past the stagnation of emotional dissonance.

I focused on expressing gratitude for my family, friends, and colleagues. Every day, I would think about the good things I've received while acknowledging the people who have brought goodness into my life. I made it a personal goal to share kindness with strangers whenever possible (under lockdown). I became mindful of my passion for helping others instill purpose and meaning in their lives—and day by day, I became re-engaged again at work. I encouraged the executive team to change their thinking, shift from a product-centric mindset to a customer-centric one, and lead purposefully. The CEO got behind me and empowered me to begin the purpose journey. I became reinvigorated in my quest for creating meaning at work, albeit at a new company, and I was grateful.

I learned from this experience that developing a gratitude mindset is not complicated; it just requires some practice. As you intentionally direct your focus

towards things that evoke gratitude, you will notice even more things to be grateful for. When you choose to be mindful of gratitude, it changes your emotional landscape. I learned appreciation is art; it transforms and lives beneath the folds of every experience, lifting us when we allow ourselves to grow. I got past the resentment to do what I love—to support and help people reach their full potential.

It's a lesson that lots of others need to hear as employee disengagement keeps climbing ever higher. It was measured at 18 percent in the United States in 2023. If current trends continue, the number of engaged and disengaged people in their jobs is going to soon even out.

We tie so much of our identity into our jobs. But the more people are evaluating purpose and meaning, and looking within themselves, they are discovering giant gaps between what they need to feel fulfilled and what they are receiving at work.

I wrote this book for business leaders who want to create more meaningful relationships inside and outside of their company. Profit is nice, but it's only one metric to measure business growth, and I would argue an incomplete and short-sighted one.

Instead of being profit-driven, companies should be purpose-driven. I know it sounds cliché, but employees of purpose-driven companies are more engaged and more passionate about their roles.

According to a study published by Deloitte in 2019, purpose is a “core differentiator.”

“Much like what a foundation is to a house, a conductor is to an orchestra, and a canvas is to an artist's masterpiece—a clear purpose is everything to an organization. It is an organization's soul and identity, providing both a platform to build upon and a mirror to reflect its existence in the world,” the authors wrote.

Later in the article, they sought to quantify the impact of purpose.

“Purpose-oriented companies have higher productivity and growth rates, along with a more satisfied workforce who stay longer with them. Our research shows that such companies report 30 percent higher levels of innovation and 40 percent higher levels of workforce retention than their competitors,” the authors wrote.

The impact of purpose is especially clear for Millennials and Gen-Zers, whose purchasing decisions are greatly influenced by the way it makes them feel. In order for your company to survive and thrive in today’s business climate, meaning needs to be a fulcrum to creating prosperity.

I get the urge to prioritize profit! Early in my career, I also found myself chasing profit and going after every shiny new object that came along. I wasn’t motivated to make a difference in the world—I was motivated by money. In one case, my company wasted six months going after an opportunity we had no business considering. Such missteps are costly!

Along the way, I came to realize that a lack of focus, clarity, and direction was leading to so much wasted time and effort. And it made me feel better inside to know that we were making an impact. By applying the framework I outline in this book and reorienting our company based on meaning, our Net Promoter Score, a metric that measures customer loyalty, went from a 20 to a 58.

Over the course of a few years, as we shifted to a purpose-driven approach, we went from industry average to world class.

I focused on making our values and our purpose a part of everything we did, including the implementation of a gratitude platform, where everyone could share their gratitude with a coworker, both in their departments and cross functionally, so this concept of reward and recognition and gratitude took off—it was a way to create a more inclusive world.

I wrote this book with my career experiences in mind. The first half of the book deals with the elements of being a purpose-driven company, while the second half details how to ensure, through strategic planning, that purpose is maintained and infused throughout your entire company.

My goal with this book is to help you recognize the value of pursuing purpose within your company and to put purpose into practice. Being a purpose-driven company will help you better engage your employees, stay aligned with customers, and make the biggest impact.

It will fill you with so much pride and satisfaction—you're thinking big and helping the world and doing something bigger than yourself. And with purpose as your North Star, you'll never feel disengaged from your work again.

INSPIRED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Focusing on purpose makes me think about the time I was invited to participate in a panel at a business conference in Miami. The topic was "Why your story matters," and as one of the panelists, I shared my views on the power of storytelling with CEOs and business owners. Towards the end of the discussion, we had the chance to pose questions to the audience. When it was my turn, I asked, "What motivated you to start your business? Was it a desire to innovate and improve products and services, or did you see an opportunity to create something meaningful?"

The audience chimed in with their thoughts, mostly centered around financial gains. As I listened attentively to their responses, a common theme emerged - it wasn't about building meaningful connections with their customers but increasing profits.

I couldn't help but feel these entrepreneurs were missing out on a significant opportunity. While making money is crucial for any successful business, it shouldn't be the only goal. Research has shown that companies prioritizing customer engagement and connection are more likely to see long-term financial success.

At this moment, I chose to emphasize that storytelling goes beyond simply marketing; it evokes emotions and establishes a deep emotional connection with your audience. So I asked, "What drove you to risk jeopardizing your well-being to start your own company? What was the driving force behind this decision, and what obstacles did you have to overcome? These are the narratives that, when retold time and time again, form the essence of your organization's identity. Your

stories serve as a source of inspiration, reminding everyone of their role in positively impacting people's lives." As I scanned the audience's reactions, it was clear that my words had little impact.

After the conversation finished, I reflected on how to shift people's focus from solely making money through launching new ventures. For my next speaking engagement, I decided to take a different approach. Rather than simply discussing the advantages of storytelling in business, I would share my journey of discovering purpose through entrepreneurship.

Initially, my main goal was to make as much money as possible. As a result, I needed help staying focused and spent all my time chasing sales. However, I soon realized that this approach left me feeling unfulfilled and disconnected from my work and customers. I felt a true sense of purpose when incorporating values and beliefs into my business. By partnering with local causes and organizations that aligned with our beliefs, we gave back to the community and established our brand as one that values more than just making money.

I encouraged the crowd to reflect on their values and consider how they could integrate them into their business practices. I talked about how stories can captivate, evoke emotions, and motivate us to action and how storytelling is about sharing narratives that resonate with people and leave a lasting impact. Many top brands and influential leaders utilize storytelling in their sales, marketing, and leadership strategies—well-known corporations like Apple, Nike, and Chobani. Influential individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, Maya Angelou, and accomplished entrepreneurs like Richard Branson and Sheryl Sandberg all share a common thread: an engaging narrative.

As I addressed the audience, they nodded in understanding, with some wiping away tears as I shared a personal story. It was about my brother's suicide and how it influenced me to prioritize purpose and meaning in both my personal and professional life.

This is an excerpt from that talk:

Let me share a story about my brother, Peter. He's in his early 30s and has been struggling with depression for some time now.

During a phone call one evening, we conversed in a way we never had before. He opened up about his passion for cars and his satisfaction in repairing them. He

confided in me about his marital struggles and the rift between him and his closest friend. Despite these challenges, he remained optimistic and uplifted. I took pleasure in basking in Peter's joy.

While listening to him, I could feel the strong emotional bond between us. His words were unapologetic yet raw and beautiful. As our call came to an end, I finally felt the closeness with Peter that I had been longing for.

At the time, I had no idea that it would be my last conversation with Peter. A week passed before my Dad called and told me that Peter was no longer with us.

"What do you mean, he's gone?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Peter's not here anymore," my Dad replied, his words heavy with grief and finality.

I fell to the ground, my legs giving out beneath me. The fear of losing Peter overwhelmed and paralyzed my mind. After Peter died, I learned no matter how hard you try to remember the positive aspects of a person's life - their kindness, their humor, their ability to inspire and teach - suicide has a way of casting a shadow over everything. It becomes the focal point of your thoughts, overshadowing all the good memories and lessons they left behind. So I am here to honor Peter's life. Before my brother left for good, he made sure to leave a message for me to find - and also something for you.

Never doubt your potential to accomplish anything, become anyone, conquer any challenge, and inspire everyone around you.

After my talk, as I was packing up my things, a man approached me. He had tears in his eyes as he thanked me for sharing my story. He told me that he had lost someone close to him in a similar way, and that my words had given him hope and inspiration.

In that moment, I knew that all the struggles and hardships I'd faced meant something. Because if I could make even one person feel a little less alone, a little more connected, then I had accomplished something truly meaningful.

I left the event feeling inspired and fulfilled, knowing that I had helped to spark a small movement towards more meaningful entrepreneurship. As I walked back to my hotel room, I couldn't help but smile at the thought of all the stories yet to be

written - stories of businesses that were more than just a means to an end, but a way to make a difference in the world. Stories like yours.