Amplify Your Impact

Making the Most of Mission-Driven Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Building truly mission-driven organizations is a worthy, if challenging, cause. We understand the principles: define a purpose, inspire people to bring their best thinking and full extent of their talents to bear to achieve it, foster a sense of connection and community that has members receive real benefit and gratification from participating in the common cause, and raise all boats in the process.

In practice, though, things rarely bear out quite that way. Espoused purpose collides with day-to-day practice, devotion dissolves into disillusionment, and the scales tilt toward avarice over equity. All this leaves a bad taste in our mouths and leaves us wondering whether the ideal of pursuing noble cause is worth it after all. To understand why this breakdown occurs so often, it is helpful to consider how we got here.

I've spent the last 30 years studying organizations and their histories and working both in and alongside some of the biggest brands in the world and in some of the most underserved communities, too. It turns out that most of the challenges that organizations face don't vary that much whether you are working with a telecom giant, a global bank, a large non-profit trying to protect the planet, or community health organizations providing safety-net care to the disenfranchised. At the end of the day, doing good work together tends to boil down to our ability to listen and act empathetically (Be Kind), trust people with information that impacts their lives and affects their work (Be Open), develop systems that are resilient and agile (Be Adaptive), and lean into the relationships and partnerships required to meet our mission rather than building walls around our organizations (Be a Network). The confluence of all four of those characteristics is still elusive, too often, though.

Most of the ways that people have found to get things done together made some measure of sense when they first emerged, but eventually the reasons faded and the results remained. Eventually "how we did things" stopped matching the needs of the moment. Here's a very quick, and oversimplified history of this evolution of organizing:

Stage 1: Bigger is Better. In the beginning, core survival needs meant that bigger and stronger was better. Whomever could get more (food, shelter, fire, resources…) tended to win the day. This led to clan and tribe-like groupings of people who banded together for safety and security. Physical strength, brute force, or the ability to gather and hoard resources were likely determinants of power.

Stage 2: Wisdom Wins. Eventually the bigger is better dynamic tends to devolve into warring factions and brute force reaches its natural limits. At that point, knowledge, insight, and strategy become more important. Being able to make better tools, think creatively, and codify and share what you have learned with others consolidates power, helps you control access to resources, and gives you the upper hand.

Stage 3: Mechanical Marvels. Smarts only take you so far if you can't scale your solutions, though, so eventually the people who can take ideas and make them repeatable by others, or take small ideas and turn them into bigger ones, begin to get the edge. This helps lots of people contribute to making and building things, but concentrates power in the hands of those who make the machines and the methods.

Stage 4: Caring Communities. Machines can only do so much, however, and eventually living, breathing people get squeezed by systems not built for them. Some leaders begin to recognize that connecting people to the mission of their organizations and demonstrating care for their employees can be a competitive advantage. Organizations that position themselves as purpose-driven begin to attract top talent and set themselves apart.

Stage 5: Present to Purpose. Eventually, if those organizations espouse caring values, but don't adjust and adapt their systems and processes to support these changing ways of leading and working, they create a disconnect that can erode faith in and commitment to that system. It is those leaders who can stay present to purpose and steer true to their core commitments in good times and bad that build the resilience to thrive over time. The networks of people they attract and inspire are those that will thrive as we head into this next era of organizing.

If we want to reap the rewards of steering true to our principles, we must consider how to reconcile the paradoxes of purpose and profit by examining how we can become more Kind, Open, and Adaptive Networks of people joining together to get good things done.

There are elements of each of these models that we can still find today. Stages 1 & 2 often feel a little archaic but are familiar and may be framed as "tried-and-true." Stage 3 leadership is still common in large corporate or manufacturing contexts. Stage 4 leaders may be celebrated as new-age and progressive, or conversely critiqued as naïve or idealistic. Stage 5 organizations are still rare, but are emerging, bit by bit as a viable alternative--though few models or maps exist. Even "new" models of organizing like holacracy, which promotes self-management and evolutionary organizational practices, are still heavily rule-based and technocratic. There is a better way. We can work, with intention, to become Kind, Open, Adaptive, Networks and revolutionize how work gets done. It won't necessarily be easy, but it will be better than the alternative and the effort will teach us all we need to know to evolve into this next era.

In this piece I suggest that one of the sources of this challenge lies in focusing on being mission-driven as a personal, individual set of leadership traits or aspirations at the expense of addressing the underlying systems, policies, and practices of organizing that are hold-overs from the earlier models described above. If we believe that mission does, in fact, matter, I argue that we must confront the alignment of our ideals with models of structuring our organizations that recognize and reward these purpose-driven practices.

Amplify Your Impact:
Making the Most of Mission-Driven Leadership

Having a clear and compelling mission matters more than ever today, especially as organizations work more and more on complex issues that can't easily be "managed" or broken down into discrete tasks. Getting our mission right, and steering true to it, has many well-known benefits: it reduces supervision costs by pointing the team towards a clear goal, it helps attract talent that cares about the things you care about, and it makes it easier for everyone to understand how the work they do matters.

What's more, we now have years of research telling us that these very benefits are the things that motivate performance in a knowledge economy. We have clear evidence that a strong sense of team, alignment of values, and doing meaningful work actually drive employee performance and loyalty even more effectively than bonuses or incentive schemes.

Over the last few decades, many organizations have spent a lot of money for their leaders to learn mission-driven leadership. Then they've sat back expectantly, waiting for the benefits of better employee performance (and thus higher profits) to roll in.

Many of them have been disappointed.

This isn't because the leaders failed at leading from mission and purpose, though. In most cases, that part of the experiment succeeded dramatically.

The problem is, the companies' organizational systems, structures, and policies haven't kept pace with the individual insights and aspirations in the C-suite. So we have grown a whole generation of leaders who aspire to something more or different...but are left trying to apply what they have learned and come to believe inside organizations that were not designed to be led in a mission-driven way.

Here's an example of how this works (or doesn't work) in practice.

A number of years ago I worked for a large healthcare client that had just undertaken an organization-wide process of setting a bold new vision for its future. After many years providing fairly traditional insurance services, very profitably, they set out on a mission to focus more of their services on lifelong well-being--betting that focusing on keeping their clients healthier would be better for business in the long run.

This was a clear shift in the company's mission. They put a lot of time and energy into communicating the bold new intentions to the company leaders via meetings, promotional materials, and live events.

At the same time, as a public company, the organization had financial targets to meet. Recognizing that their shift in strategic priorities would create some temporary revenue gaps, they set about a cost-cutting initiative that would allow the company to transition to the new mission-driven work without going into the red. For this initiative, each leader was asked to come up with a reduced budget. And while most responded with traditional methods like layoffs and salary freezes, a senior finance leader (we'll call her Linda) got creative.

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Taking the company's professed commitments to heart, Linda pulled her team together and invited them to consider how they could coordinate better or differently to cut costs in ways that were mission-aligned. Could they save money while improving customer well-being? Could they cut $1M from their budget without resorting to staffing cuts they knew would undermine the mission?

After several weeks of intensive deliberations, her team identified ways to reduce the length of a person's wait time in the call center, shorten the time it took to resolve claims, and standardize some of the technical systems used across departments to increase efficiency--changes the team projected would save over $1.5 M without having to lay anyone off. Proud of her team and their solution, Linda enthusiastically presented the approach to the executive team, who were also, initially, excited to see her bringing a larger number to the table than had been asked for.

In the weeks that followed, however, traditional methods of budgeting and reporting got in the way. Linda's innovative solution was treated as a one-time thing rather than a recurring savings effort, which removed much of its actual saving power (not to mention its connection with the long-term mission). When Linda and her team argued that their collaborative method of organizing and brainstorming could be used in other departments to save even more money, they were ignored.

Ultimately, Linda was asked to use a more traditional form of saving money and make staffing cuts. Not only was this at odds with the well-being mission, and not only did it demoralize a team that had been proud and excited to deliver a strategy that avoided the need for those cuts just a few weeks earlier, but the layoffs she was ordered to make actually delivered fewer dollars in savings to the bottom line.

In other words, the situation went from a mission-driven win-win to a mission-damaging lose-lose. The mission wasn't the problem, the systems meant to carry it out were. Examples like this are far too common as our ideals for leading in more purpose-driven ways collide with the calcified systems and outdated structures of our organizations.

Of course, systems don't exist on their own, they only persist because people create and re-create them over and over again in practice. In this case, even as the organization was setting its intention to change, some of the most senior leaders turned to familiar but harsher and less effective strategies instead of embracing new solutions that were more innovative and mission-aligned.

If we want to make the most of mission-driven leadership and achieve the full measure of impact we believe it can have, we need to move beyond developing individual leaders and look seriously at how we are organizing companies and their people to get good work done together.

Why Mission-Driven Leadership Matters

The premise behind mission-driven leadership is a good one. Rather than a small number of "smart" leaders defining goals, breaking them down into tasks, and doling them out to individuals who do what they are told, instead those leaders set a clear direction and inspire people to want to get there. The creativity and motivation this approach unlocks, especially for solving complex challenges, is far greater than any "management" approach can produce.

This sentiment was captured eloquently by Antoine de Saint Exupéry, author of The Little Prince: "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

The premise is simple: show people that they matter, as humans and to the organization and its mission, and they will be motivated to contribute in meaningful ways to reach shared goals.

The first step is the most straightforward but also the one that gets overlooked or stepped over most often: Be Kind. Treating people like they matter, and meaning it, turns out to be one of the most powerful motivators at a leader's disposal. Dale Carnegie knew this over 100 years ago when he wrote his now-renowned How to Win Friends and Influence People, and the organizations that have taken this deeply to heart tend to find that loyalty is greater, engagement higher, and that innovation flourishes.

For organizations that have cracked the kindness code, the next move is to go beyond "you matter" to "you matter to us." One of the best ways to do this is to increase transparency and openness, trusting people with the information that affects them and their work. Being Open, far more than parties and company picnics, influences feelings of belonging and connectedness. Organizations that have embraced pay transparency, for example, spend less time negotiating during hiring, tend to provide more meaningful performance feedback, more regularly, and grow their teams' capacity to engage in the kinds of challenging conversations that fuel real growth.

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Finally, people want to know that their work matters to what their organization is up to. This isn't just about "being in the know" or satisfying people's FOMO (fear of missing out). When leaders help their team, **members connect the meaningfulness of their individual contributions to the overall vision and mission, people can be much more agile** and <u>Be Adaptive</u>. Rather than just "doing their job," they are able to make contributions that continue to steer toward a collective goal even in the face of dynamic and changing circumstances.

As the pace of change increases and market uncertainty makes detailed long-term planning more and more challenging, having people who see their roles as helping to fulfill a purpose will prove far more valuable than those who see their job as completing more narrowly defined tasks or duties.

In my earlier example, Linda took all of these principles to heart: she genuinely cared about her team and demonstrated that they mattered both to her and to the organization by openly sharing the challenge of needing to reduce costs, involving them in creative problem-solving, and engaging them in finding a solution that would serve the evolving challenges of an organization in transition. Sadly, these well-informed and well-intended efforts collided with older ways of organizing that undermined these mission-driven benefits.

Even organizations that really believe in the importance and power of mission and are willing to invest significantly in setting clear direction and engaging individual leaders in championing it, can get in their own way if they ask leaders to operate in new ways inside of old systems.

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How Old Ways of Organizing Get in the Way of Mission Potential

The mechanistic models of organizing that grew out of the industrial revolution were designed to optimize assembly-line-style work that was good at producing all manner of widgets at scale. These hierarchical, largely top-down systems were built on notions of "smart people at the top" coming up with solutions and distributing tasks to a workforce that was considered largely unskilled.

As we have moved into a more and more knowledge-based economy, these methods of management work less and less well, and even in today's manufacturing environments, we know that people work better when we take a human-first approach to leadership.

Yet too many organizations qualify their care in a way that sounds a lot like "you matter, but…not as much as XYZ (the bottom line, hitting your numbers, following the rules, being a team player…)." This shows up as systems with nice recruitment materials, a collection of nice "perks," and sometimes even a lot of transparency...but also a persistent set of rules that are rigid, impersonal, or contradictory.

Somewhere along the line basic human kindness got branded as "unprofessional." Leaders, Boards, and Investors allowed themselves to believe that treating employees like whole people, providing a living wage, or offering generous benefits, was at odds with being profitable. So, we started managing human beings like resources and invested trillions of dollars in management technologies designed to turn people into profit.

The effect of this has been to reduce autonomy, inhibit decision-making, and massively increase the cost of supervision. We know that when individuals have some measure of control over how they spend their time and complete their tasks it increases engagement and fosters greater ownership. So why spend time and money on things that give people less influence and control over their own work? When the "company line" and lived experience don't match, people tend to feel inspired and encouraged initially, then demoralized and disillusioned when aspiration collides with reality.

This is made worse by day-to-day practices that communicate both subtly and overtly that "we don't really trust you." Many organizations still hold salaries so tightly that pay equity gets undermined and have bonus and incentive schemes that are unclear or hard to predict.

These "management methods" lead to a feeling of arbitrariness that has team members feel at the mercy of senior leadership, tend to foster territoriality, create conditions in which people learn to "play the game" within a chain-of-command, and turn "accountability" into a kind of quid-pro-quo where employees learn to expect that "good behavior" comes with external rewards. The results not only can get economically expensive over time, but also cause employees to end up feeling a lack of belonging-- isolated and inhibited rather than connected and committed.

The effect of this environment, then, is to create employees who don't really know how or why their contribution matters and so are willing to cut corners and do the bare minimum to get by. Why put in the extra effort when the best you can hope for is to get a pat on the back or a "prize" if the right person notices your efforts? The effect of all of this is that middle-layers of leadership feel disillusioned, and employees feel undervalued--all stuck in a Faustian bargain and unable to find the exit.

The double-edged sword here is that the leaders themselves often fail to recognize the paradoxes and tensions their own mission-driven leadership creates. In many cases, the leader does care, does truly believe in the mission, and does genuinely want to engage their team in bringing a mission to life. But despite these honorable impulses, they can't quite navigate the systems, structures, and/or people who set goals and run operations in their own company.

Believing in the power of their own good intentions, these leaders can easily fall into a sort of "benevolent dictator" mode of operating. Despite the persistence of impersonal policies and

a lack of transparency due to systems and structures the companies had in place for decades, they assume the mission will magically drag or inspire everyone and everything to align with it. Then they're disappointed when their employees don't buy into the mission as much as they themselves have.

Linda and her team provide a great example of both the potential inherent in mission-driven leadership and the pitfalls of applying its methods inside organizations that haven't yet updated their systems to align with mission-related strategy.

What We Can Do to Amplify Our Impact and Make the Most of our Missions

The reasons for doing things the "old way" mostly don't exist anymore. The global workforce is more educated than ever, the internet provides access to more information than anyone can process, and the problems that groups of people need to solve together increasingly "spill over" the boundaries of any one organization.

The examples above illustrate what leaders can do to promote the autonomy, belonging, and contribution that motivates their teams: **Be Kind, Be Open, Be Adaptive**. To get the full benefit of this approach and amplify the impact of mission-driven leadership, the next horizon is to build systems that make it easy to treat employees like whole people.

Being Kind means not asking them to "check their identities at the door," and instead creating policies that are overtly, intentionally, and unapologetically heart-centered. When people feel seen, respected, and trusted they do great work. Connect them to the why but give them the autonomy to figure out the how.

Being Open means sharing as much information as you can, then sharing a little more. Far fewer things need to be kept secret or private than we might think. Transparency can be turned into a competitive advantage. When people have access to both information and insights, they make decisions and contribute from a place of genuine commitment rather than just "punching a clock" or "ticking a box." This multiplies the brainpower working to solve your organization's most important problems, and the speed at which they can be solved. Creating a sense of belonging has people want to do their best work and gives them the tools to do it.

Being Adaptive means fostering and encouraging flexibility and operating from principles rather than policies. When people can see how their contribution connects to the mission, they are better able to prioritize, shift gears, and evolve what they spend their time on to reach a desired shared result. People who are empowered to identify, understand, and adapt to changes, and who are motivated and inspired to do so, will always solve more complex challenges in a dynamic environment than policies will ever be able to produce.

While Linda and her team were a touch ahead of their time--early adopters on their organization's journey of transformation--over the next several years, that organization took their new mission-driven commitments to heart. Leaders and teams worked to make many meaningful changes to how work got done to foster exactly the kind of innovation and leadership that Linda had modeled from the beginning. The methods of collaborating across departments that she used to find those early savings became more widespread. Even more importantly, the mindset of using the mission as a filter for critical financial investments and decision-making became more and more common.

Yet there is more work to be done, both in Linda's company and in organizations all over the world. For large, publicly traded companies in particular, there are still heavy traditional constraints to navigate from quarterly earnings

calls that favor short-term gains over long-term, mission-driven investments or sustainability. And public sector organizations are often beset by bureaucracy while non-profits are beholden to traditional funding and Board structures. More progress is needed.

The how-to manual for this new way of mobilizing people to do great work together hasn't been written yet, and that's as it should be. (After all, a policy manual on how to ditch the policy manual might be the epitome of paradox!) But I hope that the principles outlined here will inspire leaders to move beyond individual or interpersonal changes and take a meaningful look, alongside their team members, at how they organize.

In Zen Buddhism, a KOAN is a paradoxical anecdote or riddle used to help practitioners move beyond logical reasoning to reach enlightenment. I believe the principles outlined here can help us navigate this paradox at work by inspiring us to live into the promise of Being a KOAN by building Kind, Open, Adaptive, Networks of people working together to reach shared goals.

As we look at how to continue evolving our organizations to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world, I invite other mission-driven leaders to join me in building a more inclusive world where human-first principles and a commitment to transparency and curiosity fuel our ability to amplify our impact, together.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Simpson is the Founder of A Bolder Vision, Owner and CEO at Integrated Work, and Mom to two amazing humans whose future inspires her everyday.

Dr. Simpson has dedicated her life and career to improving lives, strengthening communities, and adding value to organizations. She has also been responsible for developing innovative customer solutions both on a global and individual scale and keeping work on the cutting edge of business and science.

Jennifer's specialty is in translating organizational vision into practice, and helping leaders build on and strengthen their own capacity in times of transition. Her lifework is to create a world where individuals thrive in healthy, rewarding, and successful organizations and communities. She is an author and editor of two books and multiple journal articles and book chapters and uses art and poetry for social change.

Her varied background includes more than twenty years of experience working in and with organizations across the private, public, corporate, and not-for-profit sectors to create more meaningful and effective ways of living and working together. She continues to teach university-level courses in communication, culture, and leadership disciplines and has spent a lifetime bridging worlds in a way that capitalizes on the best in organizations to enhance creativity and stimulate whole system learning.

She has developed and delivered high-ROI projects in business areas including: Finance, Human Resources, R & D, Regulatory Affairs, Service Operations, IT, Global Operations, and Executive Management in a wide range of Fortune 500, Healthcare, Educational, and Philanthropic organizations.

If education matters to you, she holds a B.S. in communication and psychology from Syracuse University, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in Organizational Communication from the University of Colorado at Boulder, where she retains an adjunct faculty appointment. If it doesn't matter as much, she's also spent 25+ years living and learning from people, organizations, and their unique passions and challenges.

She's also climbed mountains, ridden a bicycle across the Continental divide, danced like no one was watching (even when they were), visited dozens of countries on five continents, laughed (and cried) with friends, cheered her children's successes, and picked them up and dusted them off after defeats, been smacked down by bosses and built up her teams, climbed the corporate ladder and ridden off into the sunset among many other very human things!

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