WHAT ARE WE ACTUALLY BUILDING?

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I recently listened to an episode of Simon Sinek's *A Bit of Optimism* featuring entrepreneur Mary Holland Nader. During their conversation, Nader reflected on advice Sinek had given her when she was first building her company. At the time, she assumed the eventual goal was probably to build the company into something valuable enough to exit. Sinek challenged that thinking and warned her not to build the company with the goal of selling it because, eventually, the exit could replace the why behind building it in the first place (Sinek, 2026).

That immediately resonated with me. I have spent a lot of time thinking about the importance of organizational purpose, mission, vision, and values. I believe leaders need to understand why their company exists, where it is going, what it is trying to accomplish, and what principles should guide the way it gets there. Sinek's warning seemed to fit neatly into that belief. If increasing valuation, achieving rapid growth, or preparing for an exit eventually becomes the primary objective, it makes sense that those financial goals could slowly push the original purpose out of the way.

But as I sat with the idea, something told me my line of thinking was too absolute. There had to be more to it than "build for purpose" on one side and "build for money" on the other. What about the entrepreneur who loves creating something from nothing and then moving on to the next challenge? What about someone who starts a company because he sees an unmet need and an opportunity to create financial independence? What about the owner who wants to build something to pass down to her children, or the person who wants to build a profitable company, sell it, and use that freedom to pursue something completely different?

That curiosity sent me down a rabbit hole. I wanted to know whether Sinek's principle really applied universally, and in the process I found myself reconsidering not whether purpose, mission, vision, and values matter, but what we should actually expect them to do.

What Was the Why to Begin With?

Imagine an entrepreneur who loves creating something from nothing. He or she enjoys finding an unmet need, building a solution, creating systems, assembling people around an idea, and watching something that once existed only in the imagination become valuable in the real world. Eventually the company reaches a point where somebody else wants to buy it, the entrepreneur sells, and before long begins looking for the next thing to build.

That person may never have intended to operate the same company for thirty years. The passion may be found in the act of creating itself.

Research on entrepreneurial passion supports that distinction. Cardon et al. (2013) identified different entrepreneurial passions related to inventing, founding, and developing ventures. Someone can therefore be deeply energized by founding businesses without having the same desire to operate a mature company indefinitely. Entrepreneurial exit research also treats financial harvest as one legitimate exit strategy rather than automatically interpreting the sale of a company as evidence that the founder somehow abandoned the venture (DeTienne et al., 2015).

That helped me draw a clearer line around Sinek's warning. **Financial growth or an eventual exit threatens a company's why when those goals begin replacing something the founder had intended the company to serve.** If a founder builds a company because there is a particular problem he wants to solve, but later starts compromising that problem primarily to increase valuation, the financial objective may indeed be replacing the original purpose. If the founder has always loved building useful companies and eventually handing them off, however, selling may not represent losing the why at all. It may represent completing one expression of it.

A recent conversation between Jim Kwik and Jefferson Fisher helped me think about this further. Kwik distinguishes passion from purpose by describing passion as what lights a person up and purpose as how that passion is used to benefit somebody else. His passion is learning; his purpose is helping other people learn so they can use what they learn to do more in their own lives (Fisher, 2026).

I like that distinction because it frees us from assuming that a founder must be passionate about the specific product or service being sold. Someone can be passionate about entrepreneurship, problem solving, building teams, or creating systems. Purpose comes into clearer focus when we ask how that passion creates value for somebody beyond the founder.

What If the Founder Simply Saw an Opportunity?

Suppose a man notices that businesses in his community struggle to find dependable commercial cleaning. He sees an opportunity and starts a company. He does not love cleaning, and there was no childhood dream involving commercial vacuums and disinfectant. What interests him is building a profitable business that provides financial security, greater control over his time, and perhaps an asset he can eventually sell.

Does that mean the company lacks purpose? I do not think so.

Its purpose might be to provide dependable commercial cleaning that allows local businesses to focus on their own work. Its mission might be to deliver reliable after-hours cleaning to small commercial facilities. Its vision could be to become the most dependable commercial cleaning operation in the region. Its values might include reliability, respect, simplicity, and accountability. At the same time, the owner can honestly say that his personal goal is to build the company to a certain level of profitability and sell it within ten years.

Those ideas do not inherently conflict.

This is where my thinking about mission, vision, purpose, and values actually began to shift. I did not come away thinking they were less important. I realized I had probably been expecting them to serve the same depth of function in every organization. In particular, I had treated them as though every healthy company should use them to create a deep sense of identity and belonging among employees.

I no longer think that is necessary.

Research examining two decades of mission-statement studies found only a relatively small relationship between simply having a mission statement and financial performance (Desmidt et al., 2011). That does not tell us that mission is unimportant. It tells us that **writing something down does not make it true, useful, or culturally meaningful**.

Former WD-40 CEO Garry Ridge offers a practical way to understand the difference. He has described culture with the equation, “Culture equals values plus behavior times consistency” (Sinek, 2025). In other words, values begin to matter when people can see the behaviors attached to them and then see those behaviors practiced consistently. A statement on the wall is not culture. What leaders repeatedly reward, tolerate, correct, and model eventually becomes culture.

Purpose, mission, vision, and values can therefore provide needed clarity about why an organization exists, what it does, where it is heading, and how people are expected to behave. **What they do not have to do in every organization is convince employees that they have joined a movement that should become part of their identity.** Sometimes a good company is simply offering a good job, and there is nothing wrong with being honest about that.

That realization led to a different question: What kind of employment relationship is the company actually offering?

Is This a Job, a Career, or a Calling?

Amy Wrzesniewski and her colleagues developed a useful distinction for how people relate to work. They found that people commonly viewed work primarily as a **job**, a **career**, or a **calling**. Someone with a **job** orientation focuses largely on the financial and practical benefits of working. A **career** orientation places greater emphasis on advancement and progression. A **calling** orientation experiences the work itself as deeply meaningful and socially useful (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

The researchers were studying how employees view their work, not categorizing companies themselves. Still, I think the framework gives us a useful lens for understanding the kind of employment relationship an organization is offering.

A company making what we might call a **job-oriented offer** is essentially saying, “We need reliable people to perform this work. We will compensate you fairly, provide reasonable working conditions, and be clear about what is expected. There may not be significant advancement here, and we are not asking you to build your identity around this company.”

Our cleaning company might fit that description. The owner could tell an applicant that the company provides predictable evening shifts, competitive pay, respectful supervision, and straightforward expectations, while also being honest that there are only a few management positions and no large career ladder.

For some people, that is exactly what they want. A college student may need dependable income while finishing school. A parent may want work that fits around family responsibilities. Someone else may simply value doing good work, clocking out, and directing most of his attention toward a life that exists outside his employer.

A **career-oriented offer** makes a different promise. The company intends to develop people, create increasing responsibility, and provide opportunities for advancement. Its message is closer to, “Come here, perform well, develop your capability, and there can be somewhere for you to go.” If an employer presents the relationship this way, then development, coaching, internal opportunities, and advancement are no longer side benefits. They are part of what attracted people to the relationship in the first place.

A **calling-oriented offer** goes deeper still. This organization is asking employees to connect themselves to something larger than the mechanics of the job. The invitation becomes, “We are trying to change something that matters. Come build this with us.”

Meaningful work can create powerful outcomes. A meta-analysis involving more than 23,000 people found strong relationships between meaningful work and engagement, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, along with lower intentions to withdraw from the organization (Allan et al., 2019). Other research has shown that communicating organizational purpose can increase employees' willingness to contribute extra effort, particularly when they personally identify with that purpose. However, that benefit can reverse when the organization does not behave consistently with the purpose it proclaims (Brosch, 2025).

That is where these distinctions become useful. The kind of relationship an organization offers should influence what it communicates, what it builds, and what it reasonably expects from people in return.

A company offering a straightforward job **should not secretly expect calling-level commitment**. If leadership wants employees constantly thinking about the company, volunteering additional effort, taking every organizational challenge personally, and sacrificing heavily for the mission, then leadership is asking for a deeper relationship than it actually offered.

Likewise, a company should not recruit people with promises of career growth if there is nowhere for them to go. If you tell people that you develop leaders, employees are justified in eventually asking whether development actually occurs.

And if you invite people to believe deeply in a purpose, that invitation creates an even greater responsibility. **A calling-oriented relationship should not mean that the employer gets more while owing less. If anything, asking people for deeper commitment should increase leadership's responsibility to remain faithful to the values and purpose used to invite that commitment in the first place.**

The Employee May See the Relationship Differently

Clearly communicating what kind of employment relationship a company offers does not mean every employee will personally experience the work the same way.

Return to our cleaning company. Suppose the owner has been completely transparent that this is primarily a job-oriented offer: good pay, predictable work, respectful management, and limited advancement. One employee may see it strictly as a job because she is working through college. Another person doing the same work may experience it as a calling because he genuinely finds meaning in creating clean, orderly, and safe environments for other people.

Wrzesniewski et al. (1997) found this kind of variation among people performing similar kinds of work. The occupation itself did not determine whether someone experienced it as a job, career, or calling.

That means the employer does not have to transform the company into a calling-oriented organization because one employee finds deep personal purpose there. That employee may simply have found an excellent fit between his own sense of purpose and a company that never promised more than a fair employment exchange.

Employees also bring their own assumptions into these relationships. Suppose someone accepts the same cleaning job knowing there are limited advancement opportunities but quietly assumes that enough hard work will eventually lead to management. Three years later, she becomes frustrated because there is "nowhere to go." The frustration may be real, but it does not necessarily mean the employer broke the agreement. She may have expected something the company never actually offered.

This is where psychological-contract research becomes particularly useful. Employees form beliefs about what they and their employer owe one another, including expectations that may never appear in a formal contract. When those perceived promises are broken, attitudes and behavior tend to suffer (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2019).

The lesson therefore runs in both directions. Employers should be honest about what they are offering, and employees should be honest with themselves about what they are looking for. Is this a job? Am I looking for a career? Do I personally experience this work as a calling? Am I expecting the company to provide something it never promised? Is the company asking me to give something that was never part of the original arrangement?

There is no shame in any of these orientations. **Trouble begins when one side advertises one relationship while delivering another, or when the other side expects something it never actually agreed to.**

What Happens When the Agreement Changes?

Companies change. A small business that initially offers straightforward jobs may eventually grow enough to provide real careers. A founder who thought she would run a company indefinitely may decide selling is the right move. A purpose-driven company may take outside investment and pursue rapid expansion because leadership believes scaling will allow it to serve far more people.

None of those transitions is automatically wrong. The important question is whether leaders understand that a strategic change can also change the relationship people originally joined.

The Stanford Project on Emerging Companies studied young technology firms and found that founders built organizations around different employment blueprints. Some emphasized commitment, others elite talent, professional structures, or more transactional relationships. Those early choices left lasting organizational imprints (Baron & Hannan, 2002).

When companies later changed their underlying employment models, employee turnover increased and subsequent performance suffered. The disruption was particularly pronounced among longer-tenured employees who had joined under the earlier model (Baron et al., 2001).

That finding makes sense when viewed through the idea of an agreement. If someone joined a company because leadership invited employees to build a long-term future around a shared purpose, and five years later the company reorganizes itself primarily around maximizing a near-term sale, leadership has changed more than a financial strategy. Something about the relationship people originally entered has changed too.

The transition may still be the right decision. **The problem is pretending nothing meaningful has changed while continuing to expect the same commitment under a different arrangement.**

This is also why an owner's eventual intent to sell does not automatically tell us what kind of employment relationship exists inside the company. A founder can plan to sell in ten years while genuinely developing meaningful careers during those ten years. A founder could build a deeply purpose-driven organization designed to continue long after ownership changes. Owner intent, organizational purpose, and the employment relationship influence one another, but they are not the same thing.

So, Was Simon Right?

After digging through all of this, I came back to Sinek's warning with more agreement than disagreement, but I understand it differently than I did when I first heard it. Mary Holland Nader's answer about eventually exiting seems important precisely because it was not yet a deeply examined purpose. Sinek's advice mattered because it forced a more fundamental question before that default became the objective: **What are you actually trying to build, and why?**

That may be the question leaders need to answer before deciding whether rapid growth, investment, or an eventual sale represents success, distraction, or something in between. What value does this organization exist to create? What does the owner ultimately want it to become? What kind of relationship is leadership asking employees to enter? What does the company promise people in return for what it expects them to contribute?

Until those questions are clear, "build to sell" or "never build to sell" may both be premature advice.

Purpose, mission, vision, and values still matter deeply to me. What changed is my assumption that they must always turn employment into part of someone's identity. Their deeper value may simply be helping an organization become honest about what it is, where it is going, what it expects, and what it is actually offering people in return.

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