



Are you building a career or a legacy?

It depends on whether you lead
your organization with purpose.

Written by
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With insights shared by Simon Sinek,
world-renowned author and leadership
speaker who has joined forces with
EY to challenge many of the norms in
modern business.

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The better the question. The better the answer.
The better the world works.



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Building a better
working world



Careers end. Legacies live on.

CEOs are meant to think in terms of long time horizons, with both a clear eye on where the organization is going and a keen awareness of where it has come from and what has always made it unique. Their most important responsibility is to be the steward of the organization's future and the special qualities that define it.

Naturally, CEOs are also accountable for the current performance of the business, but too often this gets top priority. The combination of external pressure and performance orientation makes it hard to focus on long-term strategic vision. This leads to a narrow focus on short-term numbers that may not reflect what makes the organization unique or successful.

The organization is better served when the CEO sets direction and allows others to concentrate on the steps needed to get there.

Every day, the people of an organization take countless steps that have an impact. Those steps are measurable and can lead to tangible, short-term wins in areas such as market share, profitability and share price that are impressive to anyone keeping score. Yet few scorekeepers worry about whether such steps are in line with the organization's vision and unique character.

That's where purpose comes in. Direction should be thought of as purpose in action. When purpose is clear, everyone in the organization can move in the same direction. Without that clarity, everyone will still be marching – and scorekeepers will still be able to count those steps – but the direction will be less tightly aligned and the destination will be uncertain.

With 2 billion customers, 400 brands and approximately 170,000 employees worldwide, Unilever is a complex business – one that would be a struggle for any leader to steer and grow successfully. Yet CEO Paul Polman has approached his stewardship of the consumer goods giant unconventionally. He wants his brands to embrace a purpose that is meaningful to customers and employees. He wants the organization to halve its environmental impact while doubling its size.

He's abandoned quarterly reporting because he thinks it leads to short-term thinking. And he tries to interview at least two job candidates a week because he wants to find people who fit the company's values and will be happy in their work.

In all of these important ways, Polman is showing that being CEO is not about a career for him. As he puts it, "What is success? I think the most important thing is to achieve what you set out to achieve. Just being a CEO in itself is not success."¹ Polman believes he's been given an opportunity to make a lasting impact, and he's doing what he can to make the most of that.

It's rare for CEOs to talk openly about big-picture achievements beyond business results. Musings on legacy are likely to be considered a self-indulgent distraction unless CEOs are nearing the end of their career and taking a moment to reflect on their accomplishments.

What's the difference between legacy and career? A great career is a collection of individual accomplishments that can be assessed, applauded and recognized. A legacy, however, is the lasting impact someone has on other people and a gift they leave for the world.

For CEOs, that impact is best measured not only by the mark they've left on their organization but also by the impact their organization has on the world. For that reason, there's nothing indulgent or distracting about contemplating a leadership legacy. A focus on legacy creates a direct line of sight between an organization's purpose, how people are working to make the organization successful today, and the larger vision they are striving to achieve together over time.

A deliberately crafted legacy agenda gives the CEO a powerful tool for directing people toward steps and actions that support and advance the organization's purpose.

¹ Lillian Cunningham, "The tao of Paul Polman," *The Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/on-leadership/wp/2015/05/21/the-tao-of-paul-polman>, accessed 25 July 2016.



How purpose and legacy work together

Every organization starts with a purpose. According to Simon Sinek, TED speaker and best-selling author of *Start with Why* and *Leaders Eat Last*, a company's "why" is often defined by its founders and early leaders. Purpose is the flame that gives the organization meaning and energy.

If purpose is the flame, Sinek says, then legacy is the torch. And that torch should be passed from one CEO to the next.

In many organizations, the sense of purpose is weak; in some, it is completely extinguished. The CEO's responsibility is to keep the flame bright or rekindle it as necessary.

The CEO's career is a journey that can be told as a single story with many different accomplishments, directions, and ups and downs. But the CEO's legacy is a contribution to the organization's overall story. It is measured by how successfully CEOs keep the flame burning, not only during their tenure but also in the tenure of those to come.

This makes legacy an intangible accomplishment that is impossible to judge in the moment. Legacy is lasting impact, and it can't really be assessed until a career or tenure is over and perhaps even generations later.

Most CEOs are uncomfortable with the idea of having their impact assessed long after their direct influence has ended. They would rather be judged annually by tangible numbers that can be compared with the scores of other CEOs. This points to the potential conflict between how we evaluate success during a short time or over a career and how we assess legacy.

Sinek summed it up with this analogy. Legacy is like your children. You can't judge the impact of your parenting by the grades your children get in a single semester. You can see it a lot more clearly in how their lives take shape long after they've left home. What truly matters is your children's character and their accomplishments and the impact they have through their own lives and choices. The kind of person your kids grow to be is the legacy of your life. The company you work to build and leave behind is the legacy of your career.

That's a level of assessment well beyond conventional perspective, but it is how the impact of legacy can be seen.



The 'how' of legacy

Even though it can be confounding, this inherent conflict between short-term measures and long-term impact helps clarify the mechanics underlying legacy building.

A legacy is more likely to be meaningful if everyone understands purpose and if the daily steps, actions and decisions that affect the organization are in line with it.

Although the success of a legacy is ultimately beyond any individual's direct control, CEOs can stack the deck in their favor:

- 1. Legacy requires courage.** Scorekeepers evaluate short-term impact, while legacy measures lasting impact. It takes tremendous courage to think in terms of purpose and lasting impact rather than react to immediate pressure and tangible rewards. The leader must also articulate purpose clearly, loudly and frequently so others are emboldened to act courageously, too. What's needed is a virtuous circle, not a vicious cycle.
- 2. Legacy is a team sport.** No leader has the power to advance any significant organizational impact without support. The hard days are too tiring, the chaotic times are too confusing and the noise of urgent demands is too intense. Others must have the leader's back and help amplify efforts to keep everyone's steps aligned.
- 3. Legacy is a process, not a declaration.** People who focus on legacy tend to concentrate on making a declaration or achieving an isolated accomplishment rather than looking at legacy building as a process without end. When the Founding Fathers of the United States wrote the Declaration of Independence, that was neither the beginning nor the end of their legacy. It was rooted in the hard work, collaboration and courage that led up to the document, and it continues today in the efforts of those who carry that torch. Isolated wins or momentary losses are much less important than the overall journey. Legacy is less about the competitive fire to run one long-distance race than about the focus and discipline needed to stay healthy and fit over a lifetime.
- 4. Legacy is bigger than the individual leader or organization.** Legacy is a gift offered to others, not a reward or trophy for oneself. It may start with individual passion or organizational purpose, but it is outwardly directed. A drive for personal profit or temporary organizational success, for example, will not be meaningful to people beyond the leader, outside the organization, or at some distant time or place. Legacy must be bigger than one person or organization and must endure beyond the moment. Otherwise, why would anyone in the future feel sufficiently moved to keep it alive?



Develop a legacy agenda

Hamdi Ulukaya, who founded Chobani, appreciates his employees, worries about their financial well-being in retirement and wants them to share in the company's success. So he's giving them shares worth up to 10% of the company.

As Ulukaya says, "I've built something I never thought would be such a success, but I cannot think of Chobani being built without all these people. Now they'll be working to build the company even more and building their future at the same time."²

In most organizations, a sense of purpose among employees and leaders is dormant. CEOs such as Ulukaya and Polman make bold acts that galvanize people around purpose and send a message that is long-term and lasting.

How can you take such steps in your organization? One powerful way is to develop an enterprise-wide legacy agenda aligned to specific projects that are launched throughout the organization. This can spark a shared sense of purpose.

A legacy agenda puts purpose into action and makes people think intentionally about the steps and decisions required to advance that cause. Such an approach:

- ▶ Creates clarity around organizational purpose
- ▶ Focuses the organization on priorities outside its walls that are more meaningful to others, including customers and future talent

- ▶ Develops the cohesion of the senior team, as well as teams throughout the organization
- ▶ Guides people to align actions, mindsets and values
- ▶ Helps insulate the organization from external pressures and temptations
- ▶ Leverages short-term wins to demonstrate and celebrate progress and build momentum
- ▶ Connects people to a sense of meaning beyond themselves

For the CEO, career accomplishments are rewarding to look back on. But few leaders are oriented to or satisfied by victories of the past. Legacy connects the past to a powerful future.

As Polman says, "I know we all have our jobs, but that has to come from a deeper sense of purpose. You have to be driven by something. Leadership is not just about giving energy, but it's unleashing other people's energy, which comes from buying into that sense of purpose. But if that purpose isn't strong enough in a company, and if the top doesn't walk the talk, then the rest will not last long. The key thing for CEOs is to make that a part of your operating model."³

And that is precisely the kind of awareness that leads to a timeless and incalculable impact.

² Stephanie Strom, "At Chobani, Now It's Not Just the Yogurt That's Rich," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/27/business/a-windfall-for-chobani-employees-stakes-in-the-company.html?_r=1, accessed 25 July 2016.

³ "Interview: Unilever's Paul Polman on diversity, purpose and profits," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/unilver-ceo-paul-polman-purpose-profits>, accessed 25 July 2016.

Biographies



Sara Roberts

Sara Roberts is an executive director in the Advisory Services practice of Ernst & Young LLP with a focus on strategy, organizational culture and Purpose-Led Transformation.

Prior to joining EY, she was Founder and CEO of Roberts Golden, a boutique consultancy, where her team advised on organizational strategy and culture transformation for nearly a quarter of the Fortune 100®, as well as many other large brands and nongovernmental organizations. She has extensive experience helping organizations clarify and activate their purpose to drive their most pressing business imperatives. She has been known as a “go-to” person when companies want to become more customer-centric, innovative and agile.

Sara is an accomplished author, and her latest book, *Nimble, Focused, Feisty: Organizational Cultures that Win in the New Era and How to Create Them*, was published in August 2016. This book outlines her perspective that the most successful “new era” companies have a customer-centric purpose that focuses the organization and drives results. She is also the coauthor of the best seller *Light Their Fire: Using Internal Marketing to Ignite Employee Performance and Wow Your Customers*. She is a frequent keynote speaker and workshop presenter at top events, including Gartner, The Conference Board and the Association for Corporate Growth, on the topics of transformation, purpose and culture. She has been quoted and featured in numerous publications, including *Businessweek*, *Fast Company* and *Forbes*.



Simon Sinek

Described as “a visionary thinker with a rare intellect,” Simon teaches leaders and organizations how to inspire people. With a bold goal to help build a world where the vast majority of people go home every day feeling fulfilled by their work, Simon is leading a movement to inspire people to do the things that inspire them.

Simon is the author of the global best seller *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, as well as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* best seller *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*. Simon's next two books are *Together Is Better*, coming out in September 2016, and *Find Your Why: A Practical Guide to Discovering Purpose for You and Your Team*, coming out in early 2017.

Simon is best known for popularizing the concept of Why in his first Ted Talk in 2009. It has since risen to the third-most-watched talk of all time on TED.com, gathering more than 27 million views, and is subtitled in 43 languages.

Simon's unconventional and innovative views on business and leadership have earned him invitations to meet with an array of leaders and organizations, all branches of the military, government agencies and entrepreneurs.

Simon is an adjunct staff member of the RAND Corporation, and he actively supports charity: water, a not-for-profit organization. He serves on the board of the Tami Stronach Dance Company and lives in New York.

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