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## **LEAD WITH WE**

### **EPISODE 21: SCOTT HARRISON**

Scott Harrison:

I really wanted early on people to get addicted to generosity. Maybe in the same way that they were addicted to debauchery or that I had to entice them to a decade of debauchery. Could I entice people into compassion?

Simon Mainwaring:

Welcome to Lead With We. I'm your host, Simon Mainwaring, founder and CEO of We First. Lead With We is the podcast where top business leaders and founders reveal how they built their companies to be high impact and high growth, by putting, We First. Lead With We is produced by goal 17 media storytellers for the common good. Welcome to this week's episode of Lead With We, where I'm talking to a friend and someone I greatly admire the founder and CEO of charity:water, Scott Harrison, and charity:water is the largest water charity in America. And one of the fastest growing charities over the last decade in the country. Scott, welcome to Lead With We.

Scott Harrison:

Hey, it's good to chat with you again. I wish this was in person, but the times dictate we don't get to catch up that way.

Simon Mainwaring:

I know. We will all get together in person COVID in permitting soon enough, but to achieve impact around an issue so crucial is water at a scale that you've achieved is just incredible in its own right. But at the same time to be one of the fastest growing charities in the country over the last decade, that's a whole level of competitiveness that people would like to deeply understand. Let me ask you, Scott. Firstly, give us a snapshot of what charity:water is and a sense of what's propelled your growth or success over the last decade and beyond.

Scott Harrison:

Sure. We're a nonprofit organization with a very simple and clear mission to bring clean and safe drinking water to every human being alive. And as we record this, I'm in an attic right now in Pennsylvania, unfortunately 785 million people, so about a 10th of the people living on earth right now are drinking dirty, contaminated, unsafe water today that risks their lives, it risks the lives of their loved ones and their kids. We think that 785 million number needs to be zero. So for 14 years, we have been working to raise awareness, to raise money, to really create a global movement of people fighting for clean water using their gifts, their time, and their town and their money in the service of others with an output of making sure people have clean water to drink.

Simon Mainwaring:

And I've got to say, my respect for you is not just based on admiration for the organization. But you and I got to know each other in the early days when you are crisscrossing from New York to L.A. sharing the story, building the foundation of the charity from scratch. And I know that those first early years weren't easy. Can you give us a sense of kind of the hit and misses

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at those early years? Because sometimes people look back afterwards and they say, wow, it's obviously been an enormous success all the way through, but it wasn't like that. Give us a window back into that time.

Scott Harrison:

Well, a tiny bit of backstory or context. They're kind of three chapters of my personal life. I grew up in middle-class New Jersey. My dad was a business guy. My mom was a writer. And when I was four, there was this terrible tragedy. There was a carbon monoxide gas leak in our home and it almost killed all of us. It did irreparably damaged my mom and her immune system. And after that leak, she became an invalid. And I grew up kind of chapter one, the good kid, the only child taking care of a mom, taking her to doctor's visits, doing the cooking and the cleaning for her, very active in the church. My parents had a deep and authentic Christian faith that really helped them through this. Phase two of my life was moving to New York City to do the opposite of all that. Have sex with as many people as possible, drugs, gambling.

Scott Harrison:

I became a nightclub promoter. I wanted to be the best nightclub promoter in New York City. And I wanted to try out all of the vices that came with the opposite of the church, the opposite of the rules. And over the next 10 years, from 18 to 28 I worked at 40 different nightclubs and I chased models around the world to fashion weeks in Paris and Milan. And, I got the BMW and the Rolex and the grand piano in my New York City apartment and the perfect dog and all these kind of markers of success. And then I woke up one day and I said, "well, I'm really miserable". This is a terrible way to live life drunk and drugged out. And in loveless superficial relationships and kind of the third chapter of my life was this re exploration of faith of spirituality, of morality that led me on a humanitarian mission in post-war Liberia, where I sold everything that I owned.

Scott Harrison:

I quit the drinking and the smoking and the drugging and said, I want my life to look exactly the opposite. And it led me to a volunteer position as a photo journalist with a group of humanitarian doctors and surgeons going to a country with no electricity, no running water, no sewage, no mail and a country that had only one doctor for 50,000 people living there that had just endured a 14 year civil war and my life changed and the third act stuck. I was so overcome with admiration and so inspired by the work of these humanitarians that I said, I want to do this for the rest of my life. And among all of the things that I saw over what turned out to a two year volunteer stint in West Africa, I had lived in leprosy colonies, I'd seen tumors and cleft lips and cleft palates, and just all sorts of, of challenges, all sorts of poverty, but I saw people drinking dirty water.

Scott Harrison:

And to me that just lay at the root and the data said as well, that the access to clean water lay at the root of so much of the sickness and disease in the world. So long story short, that got me to 30 years old landing back in New York city completely broke. But with this idea that I could potentially make a difference if I picked an issue to solve. And I went really hard at it with the same passion that I tried to drink, where chase models around the world, maybe I could actually if my intention was to end needless suffering with a very specific issue, I could make an impact. So, that's kind of that starting moment. I was 30, I was in Soho New York city, I was living on a closet floor at the time because it was free rent. It was a walk-in closet that somebody had given me. And I filed for the charity:water paperwork, the 501C3 with that mission, bring clean water to everybody on earth.

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Simon Mainwaring:

Did you have any experience at that point?

Scott Harrison:

No, and that actually worked for me now, again, in retrospect or hindsight's 2020, but the naivety worked for me Simon because I was 30. I thought that I could actually bring clean water to a billion people. And I didn't know how a traditional fundamental charity maybe was supposed to run in international NGO. So I, I had nightclub experience and I experienced as a photo journalist running around with doctors saving lives in West Africa. And then when I came back, my friends worked at MTV or VH1. They worked at Chase Bank or Sephora. So I realized that people my age, 30 year olds in New York city were actually pretty cynical and skeptical when it came to charity and they didn't trust the big charities.

Simon Mainwaring:

And they probably thought that you were sort of, you've had this transformative experience, you're getting a bit preachy and how did they respond to you at that time?

Scott Harrison:

It was interesting. So when I went to West Africa, I had 15,000 emails on my club list that I built up over a decade. So these are people that I partied with for 10 years. And when I first began to tell them of my personal transformation and share stories and photos and videos, of course there were a few unsubscribes, as people said, no, I signed up for the Prada party, not stories about leprosy, but most people said, this is amazing. I want this in my life. You seem to have found purpose. You seem to have found a calling. How do I volunteer? How do I at the very least give money to support the doctors you're embedded with? And back then on my email list, email open rates were close to a 100%. So I would write something and people would read it, or I would send photos out and people would open those photos. So I was really encouraged by that maybe the same gift of storytelling that I had used to get people drunk, to get them to line up outside velvet ropes could actually be used to call forth generosity.

Simon Mainwaring:

To motivate shifts in thinking and behavior, the same tool is at our disposal, whether we put it to good use or to poor use, and that is the power of storytelling. And you've probably done it better than any non-profit out there. So how did you share this shocking story, this story that came out of such a sort of dissonant world to the world that your friends in New York are in, how did you get them onboard to start to build the foundation?

Scott Harrison:

Yeah. I love that question. Visually. So if you go back to those first couple months, living on the closet floor, what I had in my hand was 50,000 photos. I'd taken with a Nikon D1X digital camera. And I had the stories of the people that I'd met. I had pictures of children drinking brown, viscous, muddy water. Water that you wouldn't let an animal drink. I had pictures of children throwing up over themselves as they were sick with waterborne diseases. I also had pictures of people drilling wells and providing clean water to communities in need. So I went back into the clubs at first, cause it's the only place I knew where to go. And I mean, Simon, I remember getting kicked out of DJ booths at 2AM in the morning. Here I am sober in a DJ booth, I'm opening up my Mac book and I'm trying to show a famous DJ pictures of dirty water or of doctors-

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Simon Mainwaring:

You would have been the least ideal guest at that moment imaginable. You would have been just the cancer in the body of the nightclub

Scott Harrison:

It was like dude you're killing my buzz. I'll give money.

Simon Mainwaring:

Dude you killing everybody's boss, get him out of here.

Scott Harrison:

But that was it. The how was 15 one-on-one presentations a day. Here's my experience, here's the need, here's a solution. I'm starting an organization to be a part of that solution. Will you give money? And nine would say no. And one would say yes. And then eight would say no and two would say, yes.

Simon Mainwaring:

Give us the gift of your experience there. Because here we are so many years later, but the challenge is the same. You've got a lot of people on an individual basis who have been given all these ways to participate in change, whether it's donations, volunteering, buying a certain product, but they have a healthy self-interest, it's not top of mind. What was the secret sauce or magic bullet when you did this trial and error over and over again? What got people that unlocking them? What did you do?

Scott Harrison:

I think there a lot of passion at the time. I was so fired up. I mean, I was overflowing with animation or enthusiasm or passion for quite honestly an issue they'd never even contemplated before. I mean, Simon, I used to sell Voss water in our clubs for \$10 a bottle and people would come in and they would order 20 bottles to just sit there and drink champagne or vodka instead. But just in case anybody happened to be thirsty, we have \$200 worth of water. So I think this was just so "purple cowish" To quote Seth Godin. I mean the drunken nightclub promoter comes back showing pictures from the other side of the world and then asking for help. And he's so passionate and he's been changed and I didn't smoke anymore. I mean, I wasn't fun to hang out with I wasn't snorting lines of coke.

Scott Harrison:

But I also wasn't judgmental. And I think that's one of the problems sometimes with people in charities that they then expect everybody to conform to their own new worldview. So, even though I had been transformed in the most deep way, I didn't expect other people to be. I tried to really meet them where they were at and just tell good stories and invite them to participate in this thing that I was passionate about that would lead to the flourishing of humans, that would lead to the end of needless suffering for people thousands of miles away that maybe they would never meet. But I think the power at the moment was there was a proximity.

Scott Harrison:

I hadn't gone to Africa on a mission trip for a week to paint the orphanage the seventh color had been painted that year by some volunteer group. I'd lived there for two years. There was an eye witness account. These were my photos. I would open up a laptop at midnight and I'd

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say, when I met this girl, [Hawa 00:13:54] , this is how I felt, I had never seen anything... And this is what she said through a translator. And like you. I mean, I'd never even experienced anything like that.

Simon Mainwaring:

I hope everyone listening to this is recognizing that what Scott is sharing right now is a master class in effective storytelling. It's almost second nature instinctive to you, Scott, but the fact that you said meet them where they are. And then secondly, share stories, not just stories, stories shared in a personal context that really brings your own personal humanity to those stories. These are the building blocks of effective engagement that it's like the air you breathe now, Scott, but it's an absolute master class in effective storytelling. So, thank you for sharing this and continue. So what happened as you did this? What, you took to scale or?

Scott Harrison:

Well, so the first idea was to maybe parlay that naivety into a different business model. And I said, well, if my friends are cynical about giving to charity, why and what might win them over. And I realized that almost all the problems were around money. How much of my money is actually going to reach those people in need? How much is actually going to get to go build a well, I mean, how much can be taken by greedy middleman or bureaucrats, or the nice offices that the charity undoubtedly has-

Simon Mainwaring:

Healthy cynicism. And still today, that's a big issue.

Scott Harrison:

Sure.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah

Scott Harrison:

And I remember coming across the study in USA today. They found 42% of Americans just said they didn't trust charities. More recently, NYU Wagner did a study, found 70% of people said they believed charities wasted their donations. Now imagine that, seven out of 10 people giving money to a charity actually believed no good would come of it or certainly some ill, or some waste would come of that. So to combat that, I had this very simple idea.

Scott Harrison:

What if I could promise the public that in every case, without exception, 100% of whatever they gave would go directly to provide clean water to people in need. 100% would go directly to fund a variety of water technologies and solutions with the end goal of getting clean water to people in need. And then in a separate bank account that I actually opened with a different set of numbers, that would be the overhead account. And I would go and find a different small group of visionary people to pay for the disgusting unsexy overhead, the Epson copy machine lease, the salaries, the flights, the insurance, the office, all of that, the office furniture that would be covered by a small group of visionary philanthropists or entrepreneurs. So that without exception, a 100% of the public money could go.

Simon Mainwaring:

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And this is all about transparency and accountability at a time when others weren't leading with that. So you built the model around that in the first place.

Scott Harrison:

That's right. But we almost stumbled into some of this stuff, Simon. I mean, we weren't that smart or I wasn't that smart at the time and I wasn't thinking kind of forward 10 years or the term social entrepreneur wasn't even invented back then. I think then you said, all right, well, we have two separate bank accounts. Oh my gosh, we could actually do cool things with the public's money. Like tell them where it went and tell them what it did and we could track it.

Scott Harrison:

So if you gave a \$100 and we weren't using it to pay for salaries or office. All \$100 was going to Malawi or to Rajasthan India or to Cambodia. So we could track where the \$100 landed and even what village it landed. So we began and just to kind of stumble into the idea that we could use technology. Stuff like Google earth or Google maps. We could Geo locate every charity water project. We could make that data public so that anybody in the world could just go look at the satellite images of the water projects as they were built. And then we could give that back to a donor and say here, specifically, this location, this photo, these people, this is where your money went. These are the people that it helped.

Simon Mainwaring:

It seems so self-evident today, but that was light years ahead of anyone else. To help other entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, foundation leads understand this. Was it just instinctive that allowed you to do that? How did you start to think that way? Or was it just obvious to you? These are just obvious gaps.

Scott Harrison:

What would I want as a donor? If I give \$10,000 to a charity or a \$100 to a charity, I'm not going to pick on any of the big ones, but 99% of the case, you have no idea where the money went. And what's later come out is that the thing that they're marketing, text here for this disaster is actually not where the money went at all. So I think it's just a simple... If you put yourself, and this is how so many companies were started whether it's Uber, Airbnb. Someone just saying I'm trying to solve a problem. I just said, well, what would be a good giving experience for my... Look here's the thing if you go out to a club and you have a really good night you go back right? Because you had a really good night-

Simon Mainwaring:

you tell people about it.

Scott Harrison:

You tell people about it. Oh my gosh, the DJ was amazing. Oh, there were cute boys or cute girls, or the drinks were incredible. The venue, whatever it was right? You tell people about it. You want to go back. With giving, often it stops with a receipt. You write a check to a charity and they say, here's your tax receipt, or even worse, they just ask you to keep giving money.

Scott Harrison:

But that experience isn't there, that, that proof loop that closing the loop. And so I really wanted early on people to get addicted to generosity, maybe in the same way that they were addicted to debauchery or that I had enticed them to a decade of debauchery. Could I entice

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people into compassion, generosity. Could I share what had transformed my life with others focused on the most inarguable good like clean water for humans. And if we've got the business mode right, if we got the money flow right, the systems of transparency and integrity at the core of the organization, then this thing could scale. I mean, I was thinking billions in the beginning, I was thinking everybody with clean water, not let me dig five wells were 10 wells.

Simon Mainwaring:

And let me ask you this. I mean, what's so powerful about what you're saying is you're talking about the dynamics to tap into the humanity of everyone and on the strength of that humanity, scale your impact. And what you're sharing is that you've got to complete that last mile of the story journey where you allow people to see the impact that was created. And that then gives them in the best sense, bragging rights because they can say, Hey, these are the people that my donation affected and they know that it actually had a real and tangible effect. Did you see what sort of response did you see from those donors that were given this accountability, this transparency through GPS systems or otherwise? Was it, was it night and day in terms of them being engaged and donating more and promoting it to others?

Scott Harrison:

Yeah. I mean, there was some virality for sure, but I think what we found was it was really in the best ways. It was almost out of joy of a good experience. It was almost out of surprise that something actually happened with my money. It wasn't, Hey, look at me, I'm so generous. I gave a \$100 to charity:water, and here's my well. It felt a lot better than that. It felt like, wow, I gave \$100 to charity water and something actually happened. I got a picture, I got a report of where my money went and it was just a very natural enthusiasm of many word of mouth movements started. And the organization began to grow very quickly. I mean, we did 2 million in our first year, 6 million, 9 million, 16 million, 23 million, 28 million, 35 million, 45 million. It just kept growing every single year as more and more people signed up for clean water.

Simon Mainwaring:

What always struck me was that there was different storytelling strategies that kind of refreshed engagement with the brand. So I remember when you were asking people to make donations in lieu of birthday gifts. And then there was a book where you could make donations. \$10 donations on someone else's behalf, and this had its carry forward or pass it on structure to it. How did you approach that? Because I think that that really has been responsible for so much of your growth and so much goodwill around the brand. How do you think of the next expression of the same issue?

Scott Harrison:

I think we're curious, and we hire curious people. I think we get bored easily, so we don't want to do the same thing forever. Even if that same thing is working and we are looking... Innovation is a core value at the organization. I think some of it is what we're reading and we weren't reading the philanthropy trade journals. We were reading Wired and Fast Company. We were interested in augmented reality and virtual reality, and other charities were saying, we'll make sure this gets adopted first. Because, we never want to be first. What if the thing doesn't work? And we're like, we want to be first. We want to experiment. We want to try it. We want to be a part of cutting edge technology. I mean, I remember at Twitter when I think there were 45 full-time employees in the entire company we were the first charity to get a million Twitter followers.

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Scott Harrison:

We're just trying to jump early on in the dawn of social media. We were the first charity to use Instagram and I think whatever was new... Now we also have at charity water accounts on 20 social medias that folded. 20 social media companies that you've never heard of that didn't make it, but we were always there on day one, just in case, trying it out. Not needing something to be fully adopted before we were willing to experiment or try that out. And let's just use VR for an example because it actually has not gone as mainstream as people thought, but I think it was five years ago, Simon, we got eight GoPros donated. We asked Chris Milk in L.A. to make us a virtual reality camera rig with those eight GoPros and we're talking like electrical tape, okay, and a tripod.

Scott Harrison:

And we went to Ethiopia and we shot an extraordinary eight minute film of a 13 year old girl getting clean water for the first time in her life. And it shot over six actual days. And on day one when you put the headset on, you are in her village and you're watching her drink water with donkeys and cows from a swamp, not far from her house. On day two, you learn about the coming of the drilling rig. And on day three, you see the rig looking for water. On day four, there's this amazing moment when her father lifts her up as the rig is drilling and he starts dancing with her and he starts spinning around knowing that it's working. On day five, the rig finds clean water and they start building the well. And then on the last day you watch 13 year old Salam whose name means peace, walk up to the well and drink clean water for the first time in her life.

Scott Harrison:

And this all happens over eight minutes and it happened in real time, to a real girl in a real village in Ethiopia. And I think what was so interesting to us was just the medium was interesting. I mean, there was a moment in time where people were going to put away their phone and let us strap a movie set to their face and we could have them, we could intravenously deliver redemptive storytelling content that would move them hopefully to give.

Simon Mainwaring:

And it's so interesting because you're marrying timeless humanity inside people with the latest timely technology. And so it sounds like there's an innovation mindset inside charity:water. You get out ahead of where trends are going. You, you really invest in technology and sort of the latest trends in the full profit world, as well as non-profit, and then you leverage that to tap back into the storytelling that moves people.

Scott Harrison:

Yeah. Although we don't think about it probably as articulate as that.

Simon Mainwaring:

Let me ask you this then, the big moment for any brand then is when you've captured somebody, when you have their heart and your hand in a sense, how do you convert that to a donation? The same way any for-profit brand is trying to convert to a sale that makes a contribution as a percentage of the sales price or whatever it might be, or in your case, a donation. How do you manage that language? Because everyone is tired of being sold to, they're overwhelmed by all the bad news. They distrust institutions. How do you approach that sort of call to action?



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Scott Harrison:

I think winsomely. That's a word I really like. It's an invitation, so it's not guilt and shame, which has plagued fundraising for so long. And it is kind of a will you join us? Not you need to give. I saw that car you bought. I saw that... I saw you spent on that bottle of wine. You're not giving? I mean, I will say I've been in places, I've in homes with nine Lamborghinis where the donor's giving half the price of a car, a 10th of the price of one of those cars. And it would be easy to judge and say, how dare you write a \$10,000 check when you have two and a half million dollars of cars in the driveway. But I would look at that as a little bit of treasure was transferred.

Scott Harrison:

How could I create an amazing, inspiring experience around that \$10,000 gift? You look at these relationships authentically, right. Not transactionally. So I'm not going into all of these meetings saying I've got to get 300 grand at the end of this, I've got to get 500 grand. It's much more organic than that. And this is where I think my personal background has helped. So often people come to this with a chip on their shoulders, and donors can feel that.

Simon Mainwaring:

With that in mind. I mean, obviously everyone, especially foundations, nonprofits, NGOs have taken a huge hit with COVID because people have really been without the resources that are usually the lifeblood of those organizations. They've all been trying to kind of take care of themselves in these incredibly tough times. I mean has it had a hard effect on charity:water? How have you been affected?

Scott Harrison:

We're unfortunately no different. What I will say has been encouraging is everyday people, \$40 donations, \$100 donations, this new community that we're so passionate about called The Spring. The Spring is charity:water's version of Netflix or Spotify or HBO. It's a group of people from 113 countries showing up for clean water every month, giving what they can. So that has actually grown through the pandemic. Its said that it costs only \$40 to get a human being clean water. So, imagine doing that every single month and at the end of the year, 12 people have clean drinking water because you showed up.

Simon Mainwaring:

Scott, thank you for the insights, thank you for the journey that you've run. But also I want to send my appreciation to everybody who's shown up to support charity:water through The Spring platform during these difficult times, and anyone listening, who can go to [spring.com](http://spring.com) and support them even more would be fantastic. And we wish nothing more than continued success and growth, especially at this difficult time and Scott, thanks for sharing part of the journey.

Scott Harrison:

Of course, it's always an honor to talk to you and I'm a big fan of you and your work and just who you are as a person. So thanks for having me back.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for this week's episode of Lead With We, where I spoke with Scott Harrison, the founder and CEO of charity:water, the largest water charity in America, who shared with us how to cross storytelling, that engages humanity and technology to capture people's attention and how to sustain that community to scale your impact over time. And

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then finally, how to enrich lives through simple impact strategies that also drive the growth of your organization. Be sure to subscribe to Lead With We on Apple, Google, or Spotify, and please do recommend it to your friends and colleagues so they too can build purposeful and profitable businesses. If you'd like to learn more about how you can build a purposeful brand, check out [wefirstbranding.com](http://wefirstbranding.com), where we have lots of free resources and case studies. See you on the next episode of Lead With We.

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