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**LEAD WITH WE**  
**SEASON 2: EPISODE 019**  
**Ryan Lupberger, Co-Founder and CEO of Cleancult**

Simon Mainwaring:

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mainwaring and I'm so excited to talk with our guest today, Ryan Lupberger, the co-founder and CEO of Cleancult, a truly disruptive zero-waste home cleaning brand. Ryan, welcome to Lead With We.

Ryan Lupberger:

Thanks so much for having me, Simon.

Simon Mainwaring:

Ryan, you started Cleancult back in 2016, right? So you were an undergraduate at Babson College. Why on earth did you start a cleaning company?

Ryan Lupberger:

Personally, I've always been in the "natural" space, right? So born and raised in Colorado, always been really natural to my core and looked at the back of everything. So it started with food when I was younger and frankly, my parents did most of the cleaning when I was younger. So I went out to college, and fell in love with the space and went out to Babson specifically because one of the combined kind of better-for-the-world movement and scale, right?

Simon Mainwaring:

So you were intentional. You went into that with that in mind. Okay.

Ryan Lupberger:

Correct. Yeah. So parents are both entrepreneurs, never really worked for anyone and said, okay, great. How do we take this in truly a way that could affect change, right? So I went out to Babson because one of the best business schools in entrepreneurship, and I said, I need that skill set, right? And when I was there, it really happened organically.

I'd never cleaned, I'd never done laundry, I'd never looked or used laundry detergent. And the first time I used it, I used to have a bottle of the standard, obviously, that everyone does. And there's no ingredients listed on the back. So me being a Boulder kid, I looked at everything and did a lot of research as to why there aren't ingredients in the back of this laundry detergent bottle. And I'm used to looking at food ingredients.

Why not, right? So the more research I did, the more I figured out that there's no regulation in the household cleaning space. So we have the USDA, the EPA and the FDA, but almost no regulation on what goes into our cleaning products. So the more research I did, it was this crazy unregulated industry that

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the UK, literally just the UK, has banned over 1500 chemicals that are allowed here in the states, in personal care and caring cleaning products.

Simon Mainwaring:

Wow.

Ryan Lupberger:

Really just surprised me. So, that was kind of the impetus of the brand. And this was before we thought we could build a real brand like this, but there was a big problem in the industry. And then I looked for all the natural brands in the markets. If you're familiar with Method, Mrs. Meyer's Seventh Generation. And to be honest, they all use plastic packaging, right? And that was a really big disconnect for me as a younger and more optimistic self. And it said, how can these brands be making better for the world cleaning products if they're using so much petroleum-based plastics, right? So that was a big disconnect. And that was really said, what if we could do something better? So that was 2016.

Simon Mainwaring:

You know, two disruptive things there. Firstly, you were washing your clothes at college. And secondly, you're looking at the packaging and the ingredients on the laundry detergent. Okay, two truly disrupting things. I got to ask you, you shared something really interesting there, which I haven't heard in the interviews that I do is that you had two entrepreneurial parents and as you were going in to start your own venture, you weren't thinking about this category. What's the best bit of advice either of your parents gave you as an entrepreneur, starting out with your own journey?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah. And this might not be well-accepted, but my parents are both frankly hippies, right? So they're from Boulder and they both built pretty substantial businesses. And they've always come from places that it doesn't matter. And I don't know how to word this in the right way, but they try to, if you disconnect from what you do and matter, you can have complete clarity, right? But at the same time, it all matters because you're touching so many people's lives. So the way that they've essentially brought entrepreneurship into the world is trying to build businesses with the clarity of not needing to basically wake up every single day and think that if you don't succeed, everything will fall apart around you. So they've actually come from a pretty spiritual angle. And how do you connect spirituality in business?

Simon Mainwaring:

So that, if I understand you correctly, your self worth, your whole happiness doesn't hinge on the success or failure of the business, just do something kind of that you just commit to and just see where it goes and don't over kind of get overwrought by it. Is that what they meant?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah. I think that's what they meant. I'm not there yet, personally. My whole self-worth and identity is tied up in this thing, but I think there's, they've approached business in the way is that if you relax the attachment to what you're doing, then what you're doing can scale much better because it's like looking out of a window that's tied with stress and just complete energy on a daily basis. And they basically said, can we build a business without that attachment? And then therefore, can we build it bigger, better and faster?

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Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's very true when you don't have that attachment, you can see it much more clearly. And it was interesting when I was kind of starting We First two years ago, I went back to, and all that agency that I worked at Wieden + Kennedy that does Nike's work. And I spoke to Dan Wieden, who is a true luminary in the industry. And he said sort of, Oh, you're going to do that? How's that going? And I explained to him, and he said, can I give you one piece of advice? And I was like, what's that? And he said, develop a healthy relationship with anxiety.

And I thought that was kind of like a lighthearted statement at the time, but now 10 years on, when things are going well, don't get too attached to it because you'd probably don't have enough staff to service all that work. When things are going poorly, don't get too attached to that because there will be a better time. And so this lack of attachment, I think, is a really powerful message, a gift your parents gave you.

And so you came away, you looked at the category, you saw all the plastic in the category of these sort of arguably better-for-you, better-for-the planet brands. So I know that on your platform, you talk about redefining claims. So what does that mean?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yes, we started with this big issue that all of the brands in the market didn't solve my need as a customer, right? And this was before we wanted to build a business, this is before I fell in love with the cleaning industry. This is purely from an issue that I experienced, right? So that's a really big call-out. So first is that there were no brands out there that satisfied my needs of true sustainability, right? And natural brands use plastic. I couldn't really understand their ingredients. And then the categories of whole was frankly pretty dirty, right? So first off it was, there were no real sustainable brands. And I kept coming back to this again, and again, and again as I kept sacrificing. And then I tried to make my own cleaning products in vinegar and DIY, right? But I didn't have the time.

And it kept coming back, is that sustainability a) wasn't accessible for me, b) wasn't affordable and c) just wasn't easy, right? And for a year, I said there has to be a brand out in the market to do so. And there wasn't. So, my 20 year old self said, there has to be a better way. And there has to be a better way in which I don't have to sacrifice. And it kept coming back to the same issue, which is that it feels like to be sustainable and to start building brands, they're supporting movements that help the world. You have to shift everything. You have to become this dark green customer. You have to stop driving, stop flying, stop walking, right? It's really become pretty extreme. And our idea was, how do we bring sustainability to the masses, right? How do we bring "true clean" in a way that I could still be a working mom? I could still have six kids. I could still be running around a household trying to manage this, but bringing sustainability into the world. So that was really what we tried to bring in.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think that's a really powerful distinction that everyone listening should really take away, which is the heart of it is, if we're really going to drive change, we've really got to inspire, enable, equip consumers to change. But if you ask them to radically change their lives, at some point, that's not going to work because they're going to have to reorientate around this issue like sustainability, as you say, and if I

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understand you correctly, you're saying no, let's make it easy for them, reorientate the products around them. So tell us some of the ways that you've done something differently so that you can achieve that change more effectively, principally, because it's easy for them.

Ryan Lupberger:

So we started, and this was really a three to four year product development journey, right? And that's, I think, really underlining for everyone listening is it, it takes time, right? It takes optimization. It takes endurance. We've had, many a day, we didn't think this would be successful, because it was, how do we change each part of the industry? Just one wasn't enough, right? So we started with ingredients and traditional cleaning products are basically built with petroleum, right? And they use surfactins from oil to make really, really effective cleaning products, right?

Simon Mainwaring:

And you weren't an expert in any of this, right? When you were doing this, you were like a cold start, right?

Ryan Lupberger:

Cold start altogether. And I think that's almost necessary because if we'd been part of the industry, they said it's not possible, right? So I think there's such a beauty in ignorance, right? And I think it's almost necessary to like, bring into the world this naivety that brings optimism and light and hope to these industries that don't seem to have it at the moment. So the first thing is ingredients. I looked for all the natural ingredients in the market and it took us a long time to find the right one, and we actually found it in coconut oil. So coconut oil has been used across all these different industries, but is antimicrobial, it's antibacterial. It has all these incredibly effective cleaning properties, but it's never been brought to the mass market, right? So I tried all the formulas out there and we just found really phenomenal formulations. And it's across hand soap, dish soap, all purpose cleaner....What that means is, you literally take coconut oil and turn it into a hyper effective soap, right?

Simon Mainwaring:

If the properties are there, how did you discover this? And why is it not mainstream? I don't understand.

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah. So there's really two reasons. So it can be mainstream, but historically it's been for this dark green customer, right? Which is a great person out there and they're very committed to the environment, but it's hard to get that product to the mass market, right? So we have positioned this, marketed this, packaged it in a way that it's not basically marketing to the dark green person, but that's to, we call it the conscious consumer. Yes, maybe she uses, let's call it tide today. And that's okay, right? And maybe she's trying to make transitions and starting sustainable, but she's not there yet, right? So we've put it in a way that there's no behavior change and that we could bring really effective and natural formulations that, at a price that people can actually get behind.

Simon Mainwaring:

It makes a lot of sense. And help me understand just that you're a graduate, you've got the probably arguably unsexiest best idea out there in the world. Hey guys, Hey fellow students, we're at the pub.

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We're at the bar, we're having a drink. I want to launch and reinvent cleaning and you're starting from scratch. So what did you do? Did you ask friends and family? How did you even get it off the ground?

Ryan Lupberger:

So like I mentioned, it took about three years to get this thing off the ground, right? So 2015, 2016, we actually launched on Kickstarter and our value prop was just better ingredients, right? Because we hadn't cracked the packaging issue because again, we really saw three issues in the industry. One is ingredients, two is efficacy and three was packaging, right? And you're going to hang our hat on this packaging angle is how could we fix packaging and how so cleaning? How could we bring zero waste products to the market in a way that would actually be able to scale? Scale and groceries, scale and mass, scale in everyone's home across the United States, right? So we started with ingredients in Kickstarter and it was semi-successful, right? So we closed about \$20,000 and let's call it 500 subscribers early on. So that was enough to say this has legs, but this is tiny.

I mean, this, it was, and we failed in, in fulfilling half of them, right? We didn't take into account shipping costs, production costs. We were in the hole about 50 grand, which early on is massive, right? We had friends and family, we had loans. So it was a really challenging, challenging time you started the entrepreneurial white knuckle journey, right. A hundred percent. It has to be right. So we really almost dropped it in December of 2016 because we had this initial win, we brought a more effective formulation to just laundry detergent, right? And we did pretty well on Kickstarter, but we lost a bunch of money. And it was December of 2016 that we said, we're going to start applying to accelerators. And if we don't get accepted to all these accelerators, which support businesses at an early stage, we're done. We're dropping this, right? It just doesn't have enough legs. And we got in. So we got into an accelerator on the, actually the island in Puerto Rico and moved there. We dropped out of school, we moved all the way to San Juan. And we started again.

Simon Mainwaring:

Your mom and dad are like, he's as crazy as we are, right? Let him go.

Ryan Lupberger:

It has to be. And then frankly, the school supported the journey. So I moved to the island and said, look, we knew that the natural ingredients angle, it worked, people liked it, but the packaging angle wasn't there. We didn't have enough of a differentiated value prop to get real traction. So we said, okay, we're going to do it again, right? We need to hit all categories. We launched on Indiegogo this time. And this one's hand soap, dish soap, all purpose cleaner, liquid laundry detergent using our natural coconut oil that had done pretty well in the first time, right? That was really differentiated from an ingredient mix. This time we closed about \$50,000. So we did better because we knew the cost of it, right?

Simon Mainwaring:

But that's still small sums of money when you think about it in terms of the cost and what you're investing, let alone your time and so on. So you are just still hitting and hoping, right?

Ryan Lupberger:

Hitting and hoping. And that was it, right? And so at that point, we finally had, let's call it five products in the market, but really not enough progress. And the feedback we kept getting is how can you be a truly

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scalable brand that fixes the household cleaning industry when you're still using plastic bottles, right? So it was really then when a light went off as it, we went back to the drawing board and it's like, look, this isn't going to move the needle forward. And we're not really making a dent in this industry. What do we do? And we basically talked over beers in San Juan and we figured it out. And we said, what's a type of packaging that can bring a liquid product to stores, to people in a way that would reduce plastic and eliminate plastic? And we came up with milk cartons. So that was the aha moment at the end of 2017. And we said, we need to change this and continue to optimize. And we did it. And that was the ground for our launch.

Simon Mainwaring:

I love that. I mean, for everyone listening, that's what 2016, 2017, you're two years in. And you're still just trying to crack the nut of how you can actually disrupt an industry. Wasn't there a part of you that all heard or thought, God, we're crazy. I mean, we're taking on an arguably already disrupted industry. You've got Seventh Generation, you've got Method. It's such a competitive category. You've got all the big global conglomerates in there. Why weren't you intimidated?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah. I don't think that the challenge wasn't intimidation, I think it goes back to like the beauty in ignorance, right? For us, the real challenge was how do we solve it? Because I kept going back to myself as a customer who had an issue, right? There were no solutions for me out in the market. And I knew there was more out there, right?

So it was, every time we ran into an issue that it's not there yet, right? It's not there. The marketing wasn't there, the traction wasn't there, why aren't customers buying our products? It kept going back to this kind of grounding insecurity of understanding the problem. And I knew that I did not have a brand that appealed to my needs, right? And I knew that my friends didn't have a brand that appealed to their needs. And I knew that with a host of surveys, they didn't have a brand that appealed to their needs. So even if it took three to four years, we could keep iterating and optimizing to a point that we would solve a brand that would fix the industry, right? So I think it was just always rooting back in the problem.

Simon Mainwaring:

I like that. It's not like we've got to come up with that idea, launch it, be successful scale. It's like let's embrace iterating and almost stay attached. You told, you had advice from your parents in a way, but just trust in the process. I often use an expression at work, at We First, we always talk about the process, when you're working with a client, you're trying to get somewhere. Sometimes you have to go left to then go right, and so on. And I know that you then got another level of funding from folks like David Heath, who's the founder of Bombas, which is that amazing company that makes socks and soon t-shirts and underwear that really is to support the homeless. Is there a group of enlightened CEOs out there with a secret handshake that support each other and kind of help each other? How did that happen?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah, so finally we're like, great. We have this idea, right? But no one's ever put soap in milk cartons before. And so 2018, we move in. It's like, finally, we've cracked this nut. We have the value prop. We have the economics, we have the idea, we started to have the brand, but we couldn't find a manufacturer because right now in the United States, there's no contract manufacturers that can put

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soap in your milk cart, right? And you can never run a non-food product, right? So let's call it soap, lotions, sun screen, CBD on a food machine. And there's only milk carton machines out there and manufacturers that run orange juice or water or other soap or foods, food liquids, right? So we got introduced to Dave Heath, CEO of Bombas in New York City, and presented this crazy idea. And he was like, this is gold, right? And he said this has legs.

He was our first investor. And we share about 30 investors as businesses. And he really brought us into the New York city area. So we, with that, we went ahead and actually scoured the United States with this seed funding to try to find a machine manufacturer. We did, who really took a risk on us. And we actually built the first ever soap in a milk carton machine. And that was basically our entrance to New York City. So that machine propelled us to relaunch Jan, one of 2019 and was crucial. And Dave was really crucial to our early journey.

Simon Mainwaring:

You got to be accountable yourself. It's one thing to create a product that helps others and a product that's most sort of efficacious and sustainable itself, but you're going to make sure your company is. So what do you do to make sure that you're sustainable as a company? I knew you got partnerships. I think that you're working with, is it carbon fund, is that who you're working with?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah. So we sat back, it's again, like our product, can't just be sustainable from start to finish, right? So we figured out refill bottles that fixed the use angle. We figured out milk cartons that are recyclable and we actually offer a recycle program for you, right? So we cover all the costs and we'll actually, you can ship it back to us and we'll do all of it and actually reuse as cartons, right? So that's been a big movement, but the flip side is then as an organization, how do we be sustainable, right?

And that was kind of the next step is, we had to put our money where our mouth is, right? So we are completely carbon-free as an organization. We actually just completed our life cycle analysis, which was honestly about a 12-month process because they take into account everything from water use to new products, to manufacturing, to emissions, to shipping, to ingredient sourcing, to freight, right?

We're still such a small brand, but we still have such great and exciting growth. Does it make sense to invest in being carbon-free today? And we kind of came together as a leadership team and as a broader team. And we said, yeah, right. Is that we need to, again, put our money where our mouth is and be carbon-free across the board. So we officially actually reached that about two weeks ago and we are now carbon... Thank you so much. There's a long journey here, but yeah. So we have now analyzed every single step of our emissions again, from every component of our supply chain, to every aspect of our supply chain. So we can be, again, truly sustainable from start to finish.

Simon Mainwaring:

I love that because you know, what you're doing is you're controlling the narrative around your brand, by acting preemptively. Like some people are like, well, once we're big enough, or once we've got market traction, or once we've got a beachhead in a competitive category, then we'll worry about how we're going about getting the products made.

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But by leaning to the product integrity, which you said earlier on, and then leading into your own carbon footprint. Now you not only make yourself defensible in public, but you set the parameters in place that would allow you to grow in that context. So you're not creating the worst problem you've got to solve for later on. And I think about other companies out there like Patagonia, which has been such a leader for so long, they did so much in the footwear and apparel industry. And then they mapped it across to Patagonia provisions, and so on, the food category. I know you're thinking about personal care, now. Tell us about what's the larger roadmap? You've already scaled 5X in 2020 during COVID. And there's a lot of challenges to that, but what's the larger road map look like?

Ryan Lupberger:

It goes back to the beginning, right? It's a porter-raised Boulder. It's how do we bring sustainability to everyone? And how do we do it in a way, again, that's a price parody with the market that's not asking for a behavior change that you can actually integrate into your daily life without having to sacrifice, right? How are we everywhere? So currently we're in direct consumer, we're on Amazon, and we're in retail, right? So the mission of our brand is to bring zero waste to the masses in a way that you don't have to become a different person to integrate this new daily use. So that's always what we'll come back to, right? How do we bring this to the masses and to do that, it's really distribution, it's growth and it's product development, right? So it's taken us five years to get to a point where our curtains don't leak, right?

Year one, we had a hundred percent leakage in our hand soap, dish soap, and all purpose cleaner. Year two, we had 80% leakage. And when I say leakage, we literally slipped on our production floor. You couldn't walk. It was a huge liability in an absolute mess for many years. Year three, we had 50% leakage and we still couldn't launch, right? We finally launched in 30% leakage year one, which was one of the reasons it was so hard economically, right? To make the business work. Last year, we had 10% leakage. And this year, finally, we're sub 1% and we're ready to scale in a really big way.

So one step is distribution. We're launching and numerous other large grocery partners that are still confidential that you hopefully see on your shelf here very soon. We're growing and our drug partners, CVS, or growing with our regional partners in Meyer and Hy-Vee and how do we position this everywhere? So again, bring this to ease of use from a purchasing behavior and a purchasing pattern. And the next is new products. Cleaning is just step one for us, right? We want to move into what every product that has a plastic bottle that you use in your life that we could bring in a zero waste solution. Don't share too much on what's next.

Simon Mainwaring:

Come on, Ryan. Give it all here, lay it out, get in trouble with your investors, get in trouble with your lawyers. Come on.

Ryan Lupberger:

Exactly. So it's really just the beginning, but we hope to be in personal care, we hope to be in body wash. We hope to be in most of the categories that you interact with on an everyday basis.



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Simon Mainwaring:

I cannot help but continually hear this theme about the power of partnerships here with retailers, whether it's CVS or all the different sorts of grocery retailers and so on. And they're all responding to the integrity of your product and kind of the ambition of your mission, which is to really bring zero waste. So all of us purposeful entrepreneurs can lean into that and go that's enough, you're enough. If your product's good, it's enough. And just keep pushing and leaning into that. It's an exciting time to be in purposeful business. A) because the needs are so great, but B) because so many stakeholders are waking up, including the government sector, and so on, you see a lot of things happening with the Biden administration. So on what's your vision for where the future's going to go, where businesses are going to go in the future, like the next three to five years with the momentum and with the need that we're seeing right now?

Ryan Lupberger:

And this is your point going back to partnerships is we're really excited because it's not us driving the change. We are part of the change, but it's really exciting because people are driving the change, and governments are driving the change to your point. So on one side, we actually have Canada that banned a good chunk of single use plastics as a nation, right? And this news was largely missed frankly, due to all the COVID focus, but they are literally forcing retailers and people to move away from single use plastics. So this includes cutlery, this includes straws, excludes a bunch of different categories. And we're launching in numerous Canadian retailers because we're one of the best solutions for them to do that, right? So the government is going to play a major role here, right? And they are now in the energy sector.

There are then, carbon neutrality as a service and also carbon neutrality kind of as a nation. But now they're also going to do it in disposable consumer goods, right? Which is really, really exciting because they're going to force regulation and they're going to force companies to be better because we're a solution, but there's many other solutions out there, right? There needs to be a mass movement in all product categories to actually make an impact here. So the government's going to be great in the RDR, but it's also retailers. And again, I go back to, we're just so blessed to work with big retailers that are also putting their money where their mouth is. They are making these broad commitments arguably before they have to, right? And so our big strategies, the big four let's call it, have made similar 2025 to 2020, 2030 goals, right?

So it's really exciting as this doesn't seem to just be a consumer commitment. Every part of the supply chain is making it on the regulation side, on the government side, on the consumer side, on the retailer side, on the actual shipping and emission side. So we really believe that by 2025, there will be a significant portion of this category that will change, right? And I think it's going to be uncomfortable for a lot of the different parties involved, but I think the next five years are going to be absolutely transformative.

Simon Mainwaring:

I agree and if you are a purposeful entrepreneur listening to this, listening to Ryan, the big message is, be excited and go like, hell, because for the first time we have the requisite coalition of stakeholders from suppliers to leadership, to employees, to investors, to customers, to consumers, and to industries in the world at large saying, we've got to change. And you see all of these timelines, 2030, 2025 being stepped back, warped back ever closer to where we are today. And what we're really talking about here is, that

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the market forces, the wind is behind your back. So go like hell. And harking back to your parents who gave you such great advice, which is stay digital, don't be too attached. You got to be pretty bloody-minded and persistent to get through all of this. And you've clearly done that.

If you look back at the journey you've been on, since that first idea of college, what's one bit of advice you'd give everyone out there who they might have a start-up, they might have a high growth company, a Kickstarter, or they might be leading a global enterprise in terms of leading this sort of change. What would your advice be?

Ryan Lupberger:

Yeah, I think it always goes back to two. And this is not for myself, right. This is for many leaders in the space, but one is, understand your customer, right? It took us four years to get to a product solution that actually works, right. It takes a long time. And most of the really exciting sustainable brands out there, they're not putting sustainability first. They're putting product excellence first, right?

Bombas socks help everyone, but they're phenomenal sock, the best in the market. They're the most comfortable, Allbirds. They are the most comfortable shoe and yet they're sustainable, right? So I think for all of the purpose-driven entrepreneurs out there, know your customer and then position your solution as a product solution, not as a sustainability solution, right? So you support product excellence with sustainability rather than the other way around then I think the thing is just absolute intense persistence, right? It takes 5, 10, 15 years to build something like this. And you have to understand that journey early on and enjoy it, right? Hopefully if we've had a pretty good time so far, we'll continue. And yeah, I just think it's stubborn persistence over a decade.

Simon Mainwaring:

I agree. And one of the things that keep me going, and I really the source of joy and We First and Lead With We, the podcast is meeting folks like you and other leaders, because we're all crazy. And crazy loves company. And we all get together and you have a laugh and you talk about it and everyone's struggling and everyone's got headwinds against them, but increasingly the momentum is behind us. And I think everyone should really sort of, if you have that inkling to be a purposeful business and to really disrupt a category and do bring products to market with greater integrity, then now is the time Ryan, I can't thank you enough for the insights today for disrupting what is arguably a very competitive and already disruptive category and huge success for Cleancult moving forward.

Ryan Lupberger:

Thank you so much, Simon. It's a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Simon Mainwaring:

Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We, and you can find out more information on our guest, Cleancult's Ryan Lupberger in the description below. And if you enjoy the episode, give it a thumbs up and make sure you subscribe to our YouTube channel by clicking the red button below. Lead With We is produced by Goal 17 Media. And you can also listen to these episodes on Google, Apple, or Spotify. And I'm excited to share that my new book Lead With We is now available for pre-order on

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