

Simon Mainwaring:

There is perhaps no greater challenge than being a leader today. And by leader, I mean, anyone sitting anywhere, inside an organization that chooses to lead by making our future better. It's more challenging for many reasons. Most notably, the toll of the last three years in terms of compounding and concurrent crises, including COVID-19, social and racial injustice, the war in Ukraine, global supply chain disruption, the overturn of Roe versus Wade, and now, the rise and prospect, if not presence, of recession. Each one of these issues is destabilizing in its own right. But together, they make the challenge of effective and consistent leadership almost insurmountable. So much so that many leaders, whether they're part of a small company or a global enterprise, have shared with me how the last few years have taken their toll on their lives, their mental health and their ability to show up as their best for the people in their company.

So how do you take care of yourself on a personal level so that you can do your best job professionally? How do you model the behavior you want to inspire in your team so that all of you can be more positive, purposeful and productive together? And how much you reimagine leadership moving forward, given that our lives are so markedly different to how things were before the global pandemic? As we head into these economic headwinds, this question and how you answer it will determine whether your company survives and thrives as a function of your leadership. It will determine how relevant, responsive and resonant your company and leadership are to the stakeholders that make your business possible. It will determine how effectively you build your bottom line and solve for the many challenges we face that threaten all of our futures. These questions go to the heart of who we are as individuals, as companies and as change agents in the world. So let's dive in.

From We First and Goal 17 Media, welcome to Lead With We. I'm Simon Mainwaring, and each week I talk with purposeful business and thought leaders about the revolutionary mindsets and methods you can use to build your bottom line and a better future for all of us. And this is a special episode I do once a month, where instead of me interviewing somebody else, I bring in a subject matter expert. And this time we're focused on leadership.

And my guest today is Kevin Edwards, the General Manager for Real Leaders, a global media platform dedicated to positive change. Kevin is also the host of the Real Leaders Podcast, where he interviews leaders to learn what motivates them beyond their chosen career, to inspire listeners to become better leaders for a better world. And we're going to talk about how you marry your personal and professional sides to be the best leader you can and how you as that leader can show up most meaningfully during these fast-changing and challenging times. So Kevin, welcome to Lead With We.

Kevin Edwards:

I'm excited to be here, Simon, always a pleasure to see you, my friend.

Simon Mainwaring:

Now, full disclosure, Kevin is a colleague but he's also a friend. We've had the good fortune of doing a podcast together on Real Leaders called We Leaders. So I invite you to check that out. And I'm thrilled to have you join us here today, because one of the benefits of being on a podcast like this is you get this line of sight, you get this perspective when you talk to all these amazing entrepreneurs and business leaders. But you also get to see behind the curtain and see how people are feeling. So Kevin, why don't we start with you. What are you seeing amongst leaders of companies large and small? How are they feeling?

Kevin Edwards:

Oh, man, how are they feeling? That's a difficult question these days. I mean, I honestly would point that back to you, because that's what we do. We interview and we get to meet with a lot of incredible CEOs from all around the country and maybe even the world. I think from for myself and for real leaders, getting to interact in a confidential setting with CEOs, three times a month, I'm leading these groups, these forums, a few things really stand out. And now, just for people listening to this, they're small groups which we call kind of the entrepreneurial startup, maybe one to 10 employees. Then you kind of have your medium sized businesses, around the 51 to 200 employees and then the 201 to 500 employees. So I kind of moderate three different groups. And the pain points and the challenges are much different as one would expect.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. Super interesting. Break that out for me.

Kevin Edwards:

I would say that the startups are really kind of shedding their skin right now going into the 2.0 mode of, man, we had a tough run, whether it was with COVID, people leaving my organization, things are happening, going back to those core values, reassessing and finding new innovative solutions now with the new technology that's available to them and regrowing their organizations. So we're talking buy backs. People have sold their company. Now, acquiring their former company. Really buying at a good time right now when a lot of those businesses are suffering. So really, taking advantage of the pricing right now to then step into this organization and then grow it. I'd say around the medium size companies right now, a lot of optimism, actually, Simon.

I'd say a lot of optimism for a lot of these groups having wavered COVID, but now having to reassess. Maybe they had a boom in COVID going back to now, okay, we've got to hire better. We've got to make sure that we are focusing on our sales more. We're trying to seek some more capital right now. Capital is kind of tightening up in terms of the interest rates that are going up and kind of the fears that are out there in the economy. So I'd say from that side, they're optimistic, but also trying to reposition themselves because they got to be a lot more nimble and really focus on their margins with those new loans. And then I'd say for the large businesses, and this is actually, I think, a good takeaway, Simon, is the large businesses are actually more focusing on their mental state.

They're focused on being clear. They're focused on being present. They're focused on listening better and not being so go, go, go, go, go. Because maybe that's something they can allocate or delegate. They are focused on building a future. And you can't be stressed out when you're going to build a future. You need to be present. You need to conserve all of that energy that you can be, I guess, to make the right decisions. And so their problems tend to be more around people, investors, in themselves, their family, their businesses, things like that because they've got to this state. So I think it's a really interesting question. And I think that, obviously, we don't want to generalize here in a form. We don't want to do that at all. But I'd say what I'm hearing this month, right now, it's a lot of that.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think those distinctions are really meaningful. It's like any kind of consumer audience out there, you've really got to understand your audience to be able to speak to them specifically. And I want to sort of touch on that last piece you talked about with taking care of themselves. I see a lot of leaders really struggling. And I'm really heartened by the fact that a lot of folks are vulnerable out there. They're really

sort saying, "I'm not coping. And all the stress over the last two or three years has been cumulative. And I'm being very conscious about managing my own mental health state and doing things to find joy." Personally for me, I spend more time surfing, because that restores me, that nurtures me, that keeps me going when I find all of this a little bit much.

You're trying to do the right thing by your family. You're trying to show up as best you can as someone in charge of an organization. And you're trying to make a difference in the world. And one other thing you mentioned there, which I've observed, is that in larger companies they're trying to focus. And I heard someone put it this way the other day, which was really interesting. Instead of doing more with more, or instead of doing more with less, they want to do less with less. So they want to focus in on the few of the fundamentals and really get the simple foundational things right, like culture, like employee engagement, cohesion across their organization, especially when people are working remotely and so on. So they know that they've got there in this cost management phase. And at the same time, they've got to almost step back and get the fundamentals right before they can move forward again. So I think that aligns a little bit with what you were saying.

Kevin Edwards:

I think for us, and I can only really speak for myself and that's, say, is just like if the house is on fire, it's like what do you actually have? What are you going to go grab in the house? So what are your assets that you can actually prepare and invest into that time that are actually essential to the organization? And I think what I'm finding, Simon, is I'm learning the hard way that people are really your most valuable asset. So investing into the culture side of your company, those core values are so crucial. And you hear that all the time on talk shows, core values, core values, core values. No, no, no. If you're going to grow an organization, you want people to be there for the long run, because they see their vision within your vision. And so hiring and firing people right now is such a difficult process. And you were mentioning that you were struggling with that.

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, we've been looking to bring on a Biz Dev person, someone who could be my right hand person to help grow We First. And finding that right person, in my case, the brief is simple. They've got to be down to earth, really good at what they do and give a damn. And getting that all right is really important. And I want to touch on that, because the Great Resignation has sent a lot of people out of companies. And then, companies downsized. And now, they've brought people back in. And now, they've almost got to re-up their purpose, their values, to coalesce the company around them because half the people are you and half of the people are legacy folks.

And everyone's sitting there going, "Hey, do I want to work for this leader? Do I want to work with this leader? Do I want to be part of this organization? Will showing up here every day allow me to find greater fulfillment in my life at a time when I'm worried about the future and I want to make sure that I'm part of the solution, not part of the problem?" And so I do think culture is absolutely critical. And here's one insight that we've been sharing lately that I think is absolutely critical to any leader, large or small, in terms of your company. In the wake of the Great Resignation, a lot of employees who are feeling a little bit more emboldened, they had a choice as to whether they stay or go and what the perks were and so on, were a bit like, "Hey, what have you done for me lately, Leadership? CEO, Leadership, Management, why are you going to convince me to stay?"

But instead, what employees need to recognize and leaders need to communicate is that culture is a co-creative responsibility. Yes, you get to share in the benefits, but you've got to share in those responsibilities as well. And by doing that and communicating to everyone inside your company as a

leader, that who that company is today and moving forward is a function of who's working at that company today and moving forward. Not the founder. Not the heritage story. Not what you did last year. But rather, how you show up in the world today. Everyone gets much more engaged. And because they're engaged, you're actually fortifying and sustaining their culture, because they're part of that process. And when you do that, when you shift from what have you done for me lately to what are we doing together, everything changes.

Kevin Edwards:

It's a really interesting point. And I feel like, and I'd love your take on this too, but I'm interested to know, what I'm trying to do less of is less control and less structure around my meetings and around the company. And the reason I say that is, I've got to be listening more, as a leader. I've got to come into these meetings and just like a forum, check in with everyone. "Hey, how are you feeling today? What's one word to describe your emotion?" And if we go around the room and someone says... I forget what someone said today. But it's along the lines of frightful or stressed. Let's lean into that a little bit. Help me understand where you're coming from. It's like being a river guide on a raft. You can't lead from the front, because if someone gets stuck behind, or is struggling, or goes in the water, you can't go back up stream to go help them.

So a trying to come in approach, a team setting, especially when it's remote, virtual, I'm curious to know how you lead remotely. Because in these meetings, trust comes on a horse and leaves in a Ferrari. You can have a great team where you've really built a strong bond. And then a week later, it's like, what happened? I thought we were on the same page. And they've gone out of the company. So it's like, I think, just being more of really slowing down, listening and taking your time or else things are going to pass you by and you're going to miss a lot.

Simon Mainwaring:

I completely agree. And one of the things that I've applied that to is not just, and this is with respect to We First, but just what we advise companies with as well is, you've got to model the behavior as a leader. And by that I mean, you've got to show up in a certain way when you are living this remote life and being on Zoom. If you are late, if you are off camera, if you are not engaged, then everyone else will model that behavior. But above and beyond that, in terms of your vulnerability and your ability to see where people are really at, you've got to do that. And what we do at We First is we actually, once a week, we have our all-hands meeting. And everybody gets on. I actually borrowed this from my daughter's kindergarten. She's now 23, so this was a long time ago, but its strength and stretches. And people talk to what's going well in their life, their strengths and what their stretches are.

And you've got to model the behavior of vulnerability. There are times when I'm like, "Hey, I've got challenges on the home front that I'm not really coping with and they're stressing me out." Or, "I'm really worried about the future and I don't quite how to navigate it." Or, "The marketplace is so uncertain right now. How do we need to reimagine ourselves to be relevant and serve our clients the best way?" And if you start to be vulnerable and be private in public, then the people that you're actually kind of working with will start to do the same.

And I tell you, it's so powerful, because work goes from being something that I log into remotely, that I'm not physically connected to, and therefore less emotionally connected to, to something where I'm like, "You know what? There's a place where I can show up more honestly and feel connected and be vulnerable, and represent my whole self. And I want to stay there longer, because that's one of the few places of authentic connection that I have in my life." So culture can be incredibly powerful on a personal level if it's done right.

Kevin Edwards:

Absolutely. I mean, I think values attract values. So if you can find those individuals that are out there that our values aligned, it's going to be like speaking with your family. Now, as you grow the organization, you kind of run those difficult situations where you're like, "I feel like I'm with my family," but there's also an understanding of hey, we need to get things done. And so I think what leaders do a really good job of are, I guess, approaching those situations and being [inaudible 00:15:04]-

Simon Mainwaring:

Well, let me ask you about that. Let me ask you about that. What have you seen with all the interviews you do at Real Leaders and so on? And the magazine, Real Leaders, is in airports and things all around the world. I mean, it's read by leaders everywhere, which is pretty amazing. How do you balance, hey we've got to be productive with, hey, we want to be empathetic about how you're feeling? We've got to be purposeful, but damn, we've got to serve that bottom line. We've got to solve for the future and climate, oh, but we better move some stuff so we're still in business. How are you seeing leaders navigate those inherent intentions?

Kevin Edwards:

I think for us it's just one step at a time. How do you eat an elephant? It's one bite at a time. So just going day by day. And each day and each week is new. And times are going to change. And you can't be so certain in these days. I think what most people come on the show and when they give their definition of a real leader, the question we ask everyone at the end of the show, most of it is around what you may not expect on your typical stereotype of a leader. It's more about listening. It's more about having empathy. It's more about humility and being humble and really thinking of the future. And so we had a reality check, I'd say, two years ago, Simon, where we had to look at ourselves and say, "Hey, what is our mission? What is our vision? What is our purpose?" And where we really identified, as the company came out of this idea of how do I leave the world far better than I found it?

We thought that was a good mark of a leader. And then, if we were going to achieve that, where every leader is thinking of about that, we were going to think of, okay, well, we want to unite those far-sighted leaders to transform a short-sighted world. And if we do that, we're going to wake up every single morning with a daily purpose and that purpose is going to be to an inspire an unstoppable movement of impact leaders. That's what we want to do. So that's what we're doing with the podcast, Grind. We do two episodes, maybe three, a week trying to do the magazine. We're trying to do the Impact Awards this year. And then, of course, our [inaudible 00:17:05] Impact Collaborative. So that's about us obviously, but more so it's a collective of those individual that are having conversations like these and co-creating, collaborating to make the world a better place.

Simon Mainwaring:

And I want to speak to that, because I'm been a member of the Impact Collaborative for a while. And this is one of those sort of private Chatham House rules sort of forums where leaders, CEOs can get together and talk. And I want to tell everybody, if you're listening to this, that it's okay to be not okay. Invariably, you get on these group calls and people are like, "Holy crap! I am barely keeping it together. I don't know what's happening, how to deal with it. I don't know if I'm up for the task. The future is so uncertain." So I just wanted to say that, because sometimes we don't give ourselves permission to be human. And if it's any consolation whatsoever, everyone is feeling the strain out there.

And let me ask you specific to that strain, one of the tensions that you see in a time of crisis is that people's horizon lines contract. And what I mean by that, in this sort of purpose, business is a force for good space. A lot of times you always think, "Okay, got to get from short termism to long termism. We've got to take a long-term view of things. We've got to make decisions not only for five, 10 years, but the next seven generations, for example." But then when a crisis hits, typically, your line of sight, that horizon line contracts and you're like, "Oh, my God, how do I get through tomorrow? How do I get through tomorrow?" So how are you seeing leaders kind of navigate this tension between, oh, my God, our hair's on fire and, we've got to prioritize the long term?

Kevin Edwards:

That's interesting. And again, I hate to generalize, because everyone's different. There's no one leader that's the same, that's alike. There's no one person that has the same definition of a leader, which I think says a lot about that definition. I guess, what I've noticed, Simon, is that when you have that North Star, not necessarily core values, but you kind of know where you're going, that seems to be a great filter for your decision making. And so if our North Star is to inspire an unstoppable movement of impact leaders, we need more members. And so we're going to really filter and look at that lens and start to clean things up in terms of our activities throughout our normal day. You had mentioned this horizon coming close. We kind of say here, "Activity doesn't equal achievement." We're focused on our rocks, our KPIs, on each meeting. And obviously, everyone does a great job of that. Most businesses do.

But really, just prioritizing those things and making them simple for individuals. So being really simple for those folks. But I'd say also, what I've noticed most of the social entrepreneurs community has in common are these five things around impact. And that is intention. What is your intention? What is your North Star? Where are you going? Your model, what is the model that you've built around and wrapped around this intention? How are you going to become profitable? And if you are profitable, make good decisions and be accountable for those decisions. How are you focused on those customers, because your customers are constantly changing. And then lastly, transformation. Are you actually transforming lives?

That's what impact is to us. So intention, model, profitability, accountability, customers and transformation, that's impact to us. So if we can focus on those pillars, we're going to be transforming lives at the end of the day. And I think that's what makes a lot of the impact companies different than, let's say, your traditional organizations.

Simon Mainwaring:

I've been involved in We First for 12 years since I started the company. And purpose, I couldn't buy a lunch at the beginning to talk about it. I would go and talk to folks that I knew from the advertising world and say, "I'd love to talk about this is a force for good." And they'd go, "Oh, my God, that's so cute that someone like you exists." They would ruffle my hair, and pat me on the back, and show me the door, literally. And then purpose became this sort of strategic choice in recent years. And then with the rise of awareness around the climate emergency and then all these concurrent crises over the last two years with COVID, and Ukraine, and so many other things, it's almost become this mast you can hold onto in a storm at sea.

I mean, it's become so elemental and so foundational to a company, and to its employees, and as to their choices, why you work there, and is a rudder for the decisions you make and you don't make that I feel like purpose has taken a whole different role, even above and beyond what it was doing in the last few years.

Kevin Edwards:

Absolutely. And I'd say it's shifted as well. Where I try to not get hung up is more on the marketing side in terms of also, are you green washing? Are you doing what you're actually saying? I think a lot of companies get hung up on that. And now, also kind of creates a bad look for the rest of the industry. I think if we can kind of shift to this state in the future of it's just value investing, it's a good value, whereas these companies from an investment standpoint are much more desirable. Why are they much more desirable? Well, it's a lower risk. And so that's why you see impact ratings coming out, impact measurements, banks starting to step up and say, "You know what? I may charge an extra discount fee if you are not reporting on your carbon emissions, or solar, or social contributions to the society."

And that says a lot. That is a paradigm shift, if you can get the federal banks of the United States of America to tacitly agree to do something like that. So I think similar to 1971 where Nixon took us off the gold standard and we shifted to this currency, and planning, and the Milton Friedmans of the world had that shift to go, we're going to maximize shareholder value, I think we're now shifting to this new paradigm of taking into account more than just your bottom line. Clearly, you and I both interact with those individuals. But as soon as that bank steps up, it's really going to be real.

Simon Mainwaring:

I think for the first time we're seeing all the requisite stakeholders at the table. I mean, we've had leaders, and employees, and suppliers, and customers, and consumers for different reasons at different times. But now, we have the investor class. And we have the banks, and the Federal Reserve, and the stock markets, and so on as you say. And only then do you have all the parts of an engine to offer a viable alternative to the engine of capitalism that's been sort of driving us towards the cliff over the last several decades and picking up speed. But here's why I'm optimistic. And I'd be interested to hear why you are. I think, and that's a presumption, I don't know if folks listening are optimistic or not. I mean, I would say, honestly, myself, one-third of the days I wake up and I look at the headlines and I'm like, "Oh crap, this is such a heavy lift."

But I also believe that the more hands on that rock, that Sisyphus rock, that we're pushing up the hill, the lighter the load becomes. But the reason I'm optimistic, apart from the younger demers coming through, and the entrepreneurial class and so on, is that inherent in every one of these problems is a solution. When I worked in advertising as a writer on Nike and so on, I learned that when you're trying to solve for a tagline or anything, the answer is in the question. And here, these marketplace challenges are provoking us by their very nature to come up with solutions that will drive innovations, that will create companies that will generate enormous wealth and success, and most importantly, impact. And the reason I'm positive is I think we're hurtling towards that cliff. And we've got to do a 90-degree turn, because we left it so late, we're about to go off the cliff.

Humanity's throwing their arms in the air. And we're all screaming in unison, going, "Oh, my God, the world's on fire!" And we're all upset, because suddenly we've all got to grab the wheel and throw it 90 degrees. And the point about that is the first 15 degrees of that turn is the hardest, because the G-forces are so strong they want to pull you back to where you were going and take you straight over that cliff. But that first 15 degrees is the hardest. But when you get to 15 to 30 degrees, it gets a little bit easier, because those G-forces pulling you back are lighter. And when you get from 30 to 60 degrees, these market forces take on a life of their own and it's sort becomes self perpetuating.

And you get from 60 to 90 degrees and you're like, "How the hell could we have thought any other way?" And we're just in that, sort of the G-forces or on the death wobble on our skateboard trying to do that first part of the turn. What do you think?

Kevin Edwards:

Well, I think that you were probably surfing when you came up with that. And you were probably going on a wave and then you fell off. And I don't know how many waves you caught in your life, so [inaudible 00:25:31].

Simon Mainwaring:

Not enough. Not enough, but I'm trying.

Kevin Edwards:

You maybe had a lot of crashes so I know you think about crashing all the time. But no, I'm kidding, I'm kidding. No, I think that's a really interesting analogy for a lot of people out there who have lost hope. And say, "Hey, you know what? If we do make this shift, then it really will accelerate." I think the word inherent is, as you keep throwing that word around, I think it's really important, because a lot of people ask, "Well, what is an impact company?" And it's inherently built into the business. If you were to remove it from the organization, it may cease to exist or have that same competitive advantage. And so think about Patagonia. You [inaudible 00:26:11] remove the impact side and they're just another clothing company. So it's really interesting. But I think change moves at the rate of trust. And so we're not going to solve the world's problems from a leadership standpoint until we have the trust of the people.

There's a lot of misinformation out there right now, which is really threatening that trust. We're just human beings. We wake up. We go to the bathroom the same. We put on our socks the same in the morning. And those things are challenging for a lot of people in the morning. They wake up. There's so many things going on with their day. I just try to take care of my family and I've got this whole existential crisis going on. I don't want to deal with this. I get that. I totally get that. But there is an advantage to that as a business owner, where you can make a difference. If you're passionate about that and you want to make a difference and want to make a change in the world, what a full life worth living.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right. I think that's absolutely true. And people don't realize the power of that purpose, because I think the antidote for hopelessness is action. You take action. And it's funny, when I wrote my first book, *We First*, years ago, I tried to pull out these sound bites to make the thinking accessible, like the future of profit is purpose. And that'd be the celebrant, not celebrity of your stakeholder community. And the best hope for business is the business of hope. And I was actually watching the *Power of the Rings*. And I hope I don't get in trouble for saying this. I was watching that, the new, whatever, series. And I heard this statement jump out. One of the characters said... I was actually watching it last night. And they said, "Hope is the first thing to show up and the last thing to go."

And if you just think about that for a second, when things are bad, when a crisis is here, the first thing you need to do to generate engagement, and to take action, and to rally others around you, is hope that there's a possibility of something beautiful. And also, if you're fighting all the way to the end and it goes to hell in a hand basket, the last thing to go that has kept you, that has sustained you all the way through, is hope. And I thought it was a really, really beautiful statement. And I think there is real power in hope right now. I think hope is something that we've got to recognize, that we feel in ourselves, we want for ourselves, we want for each other, we recognize in each other. And to leverage that as a mobilizing force, because, yes, there are a lot of challenges.



But if you look back historically, there have been leaders facing equivalent challenges in the context of where they were at that particular time in human history over and over again. And I think we can overcome these challenges. I think we can show up in a meaningful way. And I think we've got exponential technologies. We've got blockchain. We've got AI. We've got all the creativity and ingenuity of entrepreneurs. I think we've got so many chips on the table.

Kevin Edwards:

And I think that's a good word. And really, for anyone listening out there, it's like there is hope for you. And there is ways you can still take action and take initiative on a lot of these problems. I think it's just how you show up as you always ultimately put it. It's really how you show up on a daily basis. Everyone can be a leader. Everyone in their community can be a leader. And if you do take initiative to step up in your community or whatever it is, taking part of that little slice of pie that you have in the world is what it's all about. So really, just standing up and doing those things. I would also say where we're trying to spend most of our time right now at Real Leaders is helping gain trust back into the capitalistic system.

And I think one of the ways to do that, Simon, was where we're focusing our time and energy and we're going to launch it shortly, is to really give leaders a space to be anonymous and to be confidential in what they're saying. So vulnerability is going to be key here, I think, for a lot of leaders and employees and anyone curious in listening to these conversations, because they need to know that CEOs are also human as well and deal with a lot of the same challenges that they face on a daily basis. And that there is no one easy solution to this. So I think it's funny, I always have to laugh at myself when I'm on these podcaster shows, because you listen to yourself later. And if my family member is going to listen to this, they'd be like, "Oh, Kevin's an asshole. I'm going to turn this off."

So it's a lot of big talk. But honestly, like you said, action. This is what we are acting upon. We are trying to create a space where CEOs and other people alike, just like you and I in this conversation, can really be intimate and to get that out into the world.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's so powerful. I mean, right now, my struggle is that I spent the last three years writing a book that came out last November. And it's great that the book did well. But I feel a real sense of responsibility for the amount of times that writing the first book and the second book took me away from my family and children, especially when you consider the speaking and all that other stuff. So after the new book came out, I've actually stepped back from a lot of things and said no to a lot of things, because I wanted to put that time towards the family. Only then, this is so terrible and it's an indictment of me, only when I made myself available to take up more space and do more for everybody else in the family did I realize how much they'd been doing for me to give me space to do the books and make a difference out there in the world for so freaking long. For 10+ years.

And every day that I'm doing this, I'm only probably nine months into it, I am like, "Oh, my God, I haven't even begun to repay," not that you need to, but, "begun to be cognizant, mindful and appreciative of how everybody showed up and they forewent what they wanted for themselves to allow me to do what I wanted to do." So I've got this real tension in me right now between, hey I want to show up more for them. I also want to make a difference in the world. I've got to run the company as well. And how do I recalibrate? It's like an old equalizer on a stereo. I lower this one, I raise that one up and so on. And I think we're all struggling with this all the time.

Kevin Edwards:

Everyone is. This weekend I had to apologize to my friend who was visiting, because I was just like, "I'm sorry I can't be present. I'm really sorry. This is a problem that I'm having." and I think it's known. People can call workaholic. They can call whatever else. But, interested to know how, you know have much more experience in miles than I do, Simon, in the work [inaudible 00:32:41].

Simon Mainwaring:

Because I'm 3,000 years old now, Kevin.

Kevin Edwards:

No, not at all. I'm just saying, there's wisdom that comes with experience. So I'd be curious to know what you do when you get burnt out in those moments. Are you still battling with it?

Simon Mainwaring:

Yeah, I mean, I have been guilty a couple of times in my life getting burnt out and pushing through it. And a couple of consequences, not only did I not show up as my best self, for myself, let alone for my wife, my daughters, my colleagues and so on, but I didn't have the awareness to recognize that the best service I could be to everybody else was to take better care of myself. And I actually went to away, oddly enough, it's interesting you asked that, to a CEO retreat for the first time in my life. I never knew if those things were good, bad, indifferent, pity parties. I had no idea. And there was just five CEOs. And I'd never met these guys before. And it was a men-only one just because that was the nature of the group. No right or wrong. It just was. We were all very open and vulnerable kind of on the strength of being strangers.

And one of the things I took away from that is that I need to take more mini vacations, it might be a Friday or a Monday off, and do things, more things, that create joy in my life, which is why I've been surfing so much in the last six months and so on. And I feel the benefits just in terms of who I am and how I show up and so on. And this sounds self indulgent, but just as an example, by taking care of yourself and not allowing yourself to get burnt out, you can really transform the lives of those around you. And I'm one of these people, like I'm sure many, who was guilty of always white knuckling everything. My dad was a very hard worker before he got sick when I was young. And then he passed. And I sort of modeled his behavior and I would white knuckle my way through everything.

And then what this, a person about nine months ago, said to me is, "Instead of having your fists clenched so tightly and having those white knuckles, open your hands and receive whatever life is trying to send your way, instead of having these closed fists all the time working so hard." And so that's what I've been trying to practice. And I'll reveal something here. I took it off for the podcast and we're not really doing video, but I've got this necklace that I wear now that my daughter gave me about 10 years ago. And there's two words on it that says, "Let go." And it's my constant reminder now. When I'm in situations where I feel like I'm losing balance, I'll have it around my neck and I'll just touch myself on the chest. And that will remind me and no one will know that I'm doing it, but it's just a touchstone to say, "Hey, let go of doing too much," or, "Don't put too much emotion behind this," or whatever else.

So all of that is to say, been burnt out a couple of times. It did not serve anyone well, including myself. And I'm 55 years old and I'm trying to learn the lesson about how to manage that better.

Kevin Edwards:

And I appreciate you sharing that one. It's really helpful. It's really helpful for me to understand. And I'm sure it's going to be helpful for other people listening to this, to know that they're not alone. And to

know that this is normal for some people. And also that you're not helping others if you're not helping yourself or taking care of yourself. And that really hits me, because it's like when you're in a leadership position, you are very selfless. You are just trying to help everyone and taking loads off other people to help them out. It's dedicating more time with them versus, and say, "Hey, you know what? I can do my stuff later in the day, because so and so needs help." And that's really powerful, taking the time to do that.

I think for anyone listening out there, it's like, how do you incorporate that into your culture as well, into your relationships with friends, with family members to really be present, have that time? So a lot of entrepreneurs I interview, and I actually just had a casual conversation with someone today about this, just doing some meditation in the morning, getting up extra early and just giving yourself some of that time really does make a big difference throughout the rest of the day. And so I think just, yeah, I know, I'm still working on this stuff. It's not easy.

Simon Mainwaring:

It's an active practice. And if there's any parents out there, I'll overshare. Oh, my God, the parental thing is hard. I had two statements in the last year that absolutely gutted me, one from each of my daughters. One's 23 and one's 20. One of them said... The book launch was happening at the same time. And it was all guns blazing, as it needs to be. But unprovoked, we were talking about something and she said, "I broke up with the first love of my life and you weren't available to talk to me," when she was 19, a year ago, whatever. And then my elder daughter, and this is no criticism of them, this is they're just being honest in that pure, not this self-censorship way that we get as we learned as we get older, the older one said something about going away on the weekend or doing something together and she said, "I've been waiting 10 years for you not to be always on your computer." And they said it as if they said, "Oh, there's a loaf of bread on the counter."

But what they said just fricking kneecapped me. And you just feel that as a parent, that tension. So I think coming back to the theme of leadership, we've got all these stakeholders in our lives. We've got our family. We've got our colleagues. We've got ourselves. And we need to calibrate that on the way through. And really kind of the same way we mapped out a strategic plan for our company, map out a plan for our life. What are those things that bring you joy? What are those responsibilities you have, like a family? How can you force rank those things apart from work and making money and keeping your doors open at a sufficient level that they don't slide at the same time as you're trying to, as I say, keep the company going?

And this gets even more difficult when you face all these multiple challenges that we've got coming up. We've got recession. We've got inflation. Everyone's doing cost management. Companies are going to feel the pain. There's going to be layoffs. So what would you say? How do you keep this balance right under this pressure cooker situation we're in?

Kevin Edwards:

Detach from society. And it's something I swear by. I try and delete my... We're technically a media company. But I try to delete all my social media, things like that. Because just think about it, Simon, think about how much dopamine is being extracted from your brain every time you just do one of these. And how much time gets sucked away. I mean, think about the evolution of media going from maybe the radio to then television to now, it's at the tip of your hands. Our people weren't biologically designed to intake that much dopamine every single day. And so I think that's also contributing to this underlying tone. People getting, I guess, immersed in all of this media that's going around causing them

to have tension. And I think it's time we get back into nature and really reassess the businesses that we're running and the society that we're creating or else we're not going to get anywhere.

Simon Mainwaring:

And we're not going to enjoy whatever that looks like, that version of life. I mean, here's my strategies in case it helps others. On the weekends, I do not look at the news and I don't look at social media, even though I may record some videos that then get posted and so on.

Kevin Edwards:

[inaudible 00:40:05] influencers, they hate social media.

Simon Mainwaring:

Oh, yeah. No, it owns their lives. And also, whenever I go out to dinner with anyone now, my wife, if we're going out just us or if we go out with friends or anything like that, I don't take my phone. So I literally cannot look at it. And if you look at the headlines less, you manage your social media sort of engagement and you know have times in your day week where you're away from your phone, I think you're much better equipped to keep your own mental health in balance as a leader and to show up in a way that you want to for everybody else. But I think with all the bad news out there and with the always-on media exposure that we have, we have to be super diligent about this now. It has to be a top priority in our lives.

Kevin Edwards:

Absolutely. It's a conversation that, how do you have it if it's not on media right now? And so it's got to be those one-on-one, intimate, meaningful conversations where you're planning to meet in person with an individual. Whether it's on a camping trip, or at a family reunion, something like that, just keeping these conversations going. If you're out and about and you see someone that's not having a good time, or really can't articulate their thoughts, or maybe they're having a trouble listening to you because they're so distracted with what their work and what's going on, try and approach that person. Be there for them. Listen to them a little bit. Just those simple small acts of kindness really do a go a long way in our society. And I didn't mean detached from society as a whole, because relationships are so more and more detached from the media.

Simon Mainwaring:

No, I agree. And one of the ways you can do that... I actually did this last weekend and it's something I haven't done for some time. I called up a buddy of mine who I've known for 30 years and he lives in Amsterdam. And I said to him, "You and I need to do a better job of being friends, because," I said, "what you have in me and how I feel about you is gold. And what I have in you and how you feel about me is gold. So we need to do a better job of staying in contact." So if you pull away from the media for your health and wellbeing and how you show up as a leader, but also double down in investing in that small number of relationships that are really meaningful to you in your life? I think you can calibrate a better balance. And I mean, do you think it's a responsibility of a leader inside a company to sort talk about these things to your employees, to your teams? Or do you think that's sort too prescriptive as to how they should live their lives?

Kevin Edwards:

Everyone has their own style, but I'm the type of person where I will flat out tell our team members, "I'm burnt out." And they get it. And having that trust and that transparency, everyone's able to just share their emotions and as we say, "Just wear it on your sleeve." When you show up, wear it on your sleeve. I can't guess these things. So really checking in with your team members on those conversations, whether that's the very beginning of a meeting or after the meeting, checking in with them afterward, but making sure that you're fully aware of everyone that's in that room and that you are understanding of those individuals' emotions. Because working remotely, you just have no idea what's going on in that individual's life. And I think that's what leader, not may have forgotten, but certainly, something that could be easily forgotten when you work remotely.

Simon Mainwaring:

No, absolutely. And what about the near-term future? I mean, every leader, whether you're a startup with three people or whether you've got a hundred thousand people in your charge, everyone's worried about the future economically, let alone climate and so many other issues. And our employees often might be really concerned. Are there going to be layoffs? We see the tech companies doing layoffs. We see this bad news. The stock market correcting and so on. Are you finding that leaders actually sort of say, "Hey, we're going to communicate openly and transparently about how we are doing, how we're making sense of the marketplace and what we think will happen in the near term"? Or is it like we don't want to scare people or we don't want to kind of go there, because it's treacherous territory. What are you hearing from folks?

Kevin Edwards:

So, I guess, what I've observed from individuals, whether you're an employee at a hundred thousand person company, from the employee's perspective, there's no transparency from a lot of these leaders. There's no transparency with why a big shift or a change in the company is being made. And for a reason is not having to explain yourself. Maybe a reason would be, we're making a financial decision for the company, it's better for the long term of the organization. And that happens. But I think listening to your interview with Rick and Patagonia, it's like they're wearing it on their sleeves. When they mess up, they want to tell the whole world. They have this extreme transparency built in. And Simon, it's funny. When he said that, on my first podcast I ever did, our whole slogan is completely changed. Our whole slogan was just all about transparency.

And because I thought that that would be the key to really making the change we want to have as a society, as a culture, as a business. So I'd say for the hundred thousand employee companies, it's difficult to have that extreme transparency. But certainly, very necessary to have, I guess, if it's inherent to you.

Simon Mainwaring:

Right, right. And I'm going to do something. I'm going to volunteer three attributes that I think will define leadership moving forward. And I invite you to do the same. And I just threw this question at Kevin. So one, I'd say, is that leadership is increasingly going to be defined by your ability to manage through multiple crises at once. And I think we've all had to deal with it in the last few years. And we're all waiting for it to end. But I don't think it's going to end, because all these interconnected crises are going to continue. So that's one. The second thing is I think leadership needs to be of the best service to all its stakeholders. You need to back out of the future rather than build on the past. And what I mean by that is, the past has less to do with the future than ever.

Because the forces we're unleashing in terms of climate, and biodiversity, and ocean acidification, and so many things, and the half-life of technology, and the cascading effect of disparity of wealth and all these sort of issues, are such that it's going to be exponential, the shifts in what we're all going to be facing moving forward. And we're seeing that in our own lives with all these crises. So we should back out of the future rather than build on the past.

And then thirdly, as we adjust to this, we're going to have to model the behavior that we want to inspire in others in our organization. And that may seem very trite or whatever. But I think to your point about vulnerability and taking care of yourself and allowing everyone to rally around you when you are not coping, I think these are things that we are going to have to carry forward and do more of. So that would be the three that I would volunteer out there. How's that for a hot seat? All right, your turn.

Kevin Edwards:

I was confused why you didn't say, "We," as one of those attributes. We, to Lead With We.

Simon Mainwaring:

Well, hopefully, that's inherent in Lead With We, but if it's not, I'll say it again. But your turn.

Kevin Edwards:

My philosophy on this is literally just it comes down to you as an individual, because everyone's different. Just having interviewed, and you've interviewed so many different leaders, everyone is different. Everyone has their own philosophy. So really just trying to be the best version of yourself. So I'd say key attributes for those individuals, I'd say one would be poise, just throughout crisis, just having some poise. You don't need to overreact. You're okay. You woke up this morning. Having some poise. I think belief. Just keep constantly keeping that consistent belief, I think, is really important. Staying with that mission. Staying with the drive. Staying with the North Star no matter what happens. And I think, I don't know, but maybe toughness, having some toughness to you, some boldness, some courage to step up and do the right thing when times are tough.

So I'd say those three key attributes to make yourself and to really tap into those three things that you already have as a leader. Expressing those in a way throughout your culture, your products, your organization. Poise, belief and toughness, those are three key attributes that I really like.

Simon Mainwaring:

No, I think they're incredibly valuable. And I want to say, Kevin, Real Leaders has been a really powerful influence in my journey over the last 10 years. And all the insights from the magazine, and the community, and being part of the Impact Collaborative have been incredibly important to me, because I'm not coping. I don't know what the future looks like. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. And I'm working it out as I go along. So enormous respect for what Real Leaders is doing. And thank you for sharing the insights today.

And I think the good news is, crazy loves company in the sense that we're all crazy, because we all believe that we're going to fix this future. And it's a lonely road. But there are many other people out there like ourselves, like you, like me, who give a damn enough to show up each day and put their shoulder to the wheel and get it done. So I really appreciate the Real Leaders community for that and for your role and leadership within it. And thanks for the insights today.

Kevin Edwards:

No, no, of course. No, Simon, I always learn something, of course, from you and appreciate just being invited on this exemplary show. I think you do a terrific job. I'm envious of a lot of the people you have on this show. I mean, I think you guys just kill it and crush it out the box. And a big shout out to Goal 17 producing this as well. I think that they do an incredible job. I just know how much work it is. I edit our own podcast, so I just know how much time goes into those things and how special it is to have a crew that can do a good job by producing each episode. So I really do appreciate your staff as well.

But no, Real Leaders is all about co-creation as well, collaboration. And so Simon, to have you a part of the community, we're learning just as much from you as you might be learning from the others in your community. As the community continues to grow, we're learning. We're taking bits and pieces away from individuals. And that's what's kind of developing this unique, impact-oriented CEO community, because it's built by the people, it's for the people. And so we're trying to do our best with managing all these CEOs and their times, and their schedules, and their feedback. But it's, I think, just continuing to keep that curiosity mindset of learning each day, just like how I learned so much from this podcast is what's been really helpful for us. So I appreciate your time being on here. And thanks for being a part of the community.

Simon Mainwaring:

No, absolutely. And what you made there is a one point that I think is so important. Someone made a comment to me not so long ago that they felt like the scaffolding of life was sort of breaking down the things that held up the way that we wanted the world to be. And I deeply believe that we, each other, are the new human scaffolding. We, our relationships with each other, our relationships with people that care about the same things and that want to make a difference and show up are the scaffolding on which we can build that future. And I think now is the time to go like hell. And together, there's nothing we can't do. So Kevin, thank you. And to be continued. And I'll see you on a podcast real soon.

Kevin Edwards:

Hopefully, on a surf beforehand though. You still owe me one.

Simon Mainwaring:

Absolutely. Thanks for joining us for another episode of Lead With We. Our show is produced by Goal 17 Media. And you can always find more information about our guests in the show notes of each episode. Make sure you follow Lead With We on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or Google Podcasts. If you really love the show, share it with your friends and colleagues. And if you're looking to go even deeper into the world of purposeful business, check out my new book and Wall Street Journal bestseller, Lead With We, which is available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Google Books. See you again soon. And until then, let's all lead with we.