

Important Work Isn't About What You Make

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Windows are important. Think about what a window actually does. Windows keep the cold out and warmth in, they let light into a room where a child is doing homework, they give a family a view of the backyard where the dog is running. Windows protect people and they connect people to the world outside their walls. There is nothing trivial about that.

I worked with a company that made windows. They were very good windows. The people on the floor were skilled and the product was real. And yet, if you spent any time in that building, you could feel that something was off. I couldn't put my finger on it at the time, but it was a hollow place.

Over time, I put the pieces together. The root of that hollowness was that the owners were building the company to sell it. Every decision, every hire, and every initiative was being shaped, consciously or not, by that goal. Private equity was the north star and the exit was the actual important work.

I think it is important to note though that they probably didn't think of themselves as doing anything wrong. They'd built something and they wanted to be rewarded for it. That's not villainous or evil, or even vaguely wrong.

But what is critical to understand is the impact that had on the environment within which the people worked. That goal made the work important to the leaders for reasons that had nothing to do with the people doing it. The windows mattered to them because the windows made the company valuable. And the company was valuable because someone would eventually buy it. But what about the people? They would still be on the factory floor.

They would gain nothing. And somewhere beneath the surface they knew it.

This is what happens when leaders define Important Work through their own lens and forget to ask whether anyone else can see themselves in it. Windows are genuinely important, but importance that only serves the people at the top of the org chart is not a shared purpose, it's a personal ambition with employees as the means.

Important Work is the first element of a Courage Economy. It requires that people can answer a question with honesty. Does what I do here matter, and does it matter for me too?

People want to know that it is not just for the owners' portfolio or their quarterly numbers. They want to know and feel that it also matters to me? Does my effort, my skill, and my hours count for anything beyond my paycheck?

When leaders build a culture around a vision that excludes the people doing the work, they create an organization where everyone is technically employed but nobody is really there. The lights are on, the windows ship but the energy that should be powering something meaningful is quietly draining away.

The window company wasn't a bad place, but it was a hollow one.

There's a difference. And that difference is everything when you want people to dedicate their effort and a good chunk of their lives to whatever it is you are trying to do.