

Leading into your best

Living Well Together – People and Planet

James Cameron Vice President of Global Leadership and Learning in Walmart talks to **Elaine Herdman-Barker**, Chair of Global Leadership Associates and Partner for Mutual Growth and the search for the Common Good to reflect on what 'leading into your best' really means. In an immense organisation, like Walmart, leaders have the opportunity to better the environment and shift global thinking, on sustainable ways of living. At the same time, they need to deliver as retailers. How do they find themselves in such a large system? Is it possible to harmonise a hard-nosed business approach with a more holistic regenerative vision?

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I'm here with Colonel James Cameron. James served his country as an army officer before joining the Intelligence Service. More recently – as Vice-President of GLA – he's helped business leaders flourish in companies such as Walmart.

Today, we'll be talking about how what James calls "leading into your best" can be good for others. We'll also touch on how leaders scratch existential itches... What's their purpose? Who are they becoming? And how can they find meaning in work?

Starting with context, James, you've worked in systems where leaders have the power to better lives – or not... So in a company the size of Walmart, where leaders can create change internationally, how are you thinking about leadership?

Thanks for having me. For those who are unfamiliar, Walmart is America's largest employer. We have about 1.3 million individuals, or associates. But it's also a global company: we're one of the largest employers in many of the other countries we work in. So that gives us a lot of influence and, alongside that, there's a scale to make a statistical difference.





And was that apparent to you **before you went there?**

Yes, that strong purpose is one of the things that drew me to Walmart. Essentially, we're running a retail operation and making it as effective as possible. But through that lens, we can also make a difference to people. And I think that's how many individuals see it in the company. So my job is to insinuate into that motive other ways of helping people see themselves, see their teams, and see their ultimate impact. And this is how I personally feel I can make a difference. I see myself as helping people on a journey.

I've often heard you say that Walmart's purpose is about delivering to human need. Does that mean that, in Walmart, leaders need to become ever more aligned in service – not just profit?

Yes. And the founder, Sam Walton, really understood that. Like many of his generation in the south of America, he had a very deep faith. Whether that was his own guiding motivation or not, which I think it was, he understood something important... That if customers believed the company was

trying its best to serve them, it would be good for business. And if Walmart's leaders truly understood that they were serving their customers, and serving the people that they led, that would be good for performance – because you get so much more out of people that way.

So do you think Sam Walton did that for business reasons? Or for personal reasons?

I think he did it for both, which is extremely strong. To this day, Sam Walton is affectionately known in the company as Mr. Sam. In terms of motivating people, however, I think he had a hard-nosed business approach to what some organisations would completely rely on. Walmart tries to sell everything at the lowest possible cost on behalf of the customer. That's our business model and our purpose: to save people money so that they can live better. We care about the under-served in America. And many of the people that work for Walmart are only one or two pay cheques away from poverty themselves.

We are serving ourselves and serving the customer, all wrapped together... And that's a very difficult place to be as a company, especially during times of inflation like now. It's also difficult to bring certain people into the company. People who understand e-commerce and the digital environment are a good example. Quite often, they don't have such a close relationship to people in their mind. The evolving natures of the company and retail can distance us from those customers. So in my mind, for example, I always serve someone called Dolores... It focuses me. I think all Walmart's leaders try to keep that sense of service alive while dealing with customers through clicks and gigabytes.

Do leaders sometimes feel there's a gulf between their everyday work and the world beyond its walls?

Funnily enough, this is a conversation I was having with a group yesterday evening. I'm responsible for a lot of Walmart's executive education... That includes a pipeline for trying to find our best, most diverse talent. The idea is to accelerate them through the company. Yesterday, I was talking to a group that's been through a six-month programme about strategic foresight... How do you look ten years into the future, in order not to be a victim of that future, but to have some agency?



And what were they saying, **specifically?**

They were asking. “We have some tools for thinking about what may come, none of which are particularly accurate but better than nothing,... Now, how can we believe we have some agency?” And the answer is that you find more people like you, and you support each other... You make sure

that thinking like this is seen to be commercially advantageous. In terms of vertical development, it all comes down to making sure that – whatever your worldview; Achiever, Learner, whatever – the benefit of doing good actually resonates.



So they have to believe that they can say – to repeat a phrase I’ve heard from you: “I can do something about that, I’m not helpless...”

Yes. I do find myself helping people who have a burning desire to make something good, do something good... I help them turn that into something which is, commercially, extremely powerful. Because if you don’t do that, it becomes that person’s side project.

It becomes that person’s hobby as opposed to something we’ll latch onto. And there’s a lot of that going on around the company, so it’s a question of trying to get them to coalesce into a movement.

Am I to understand that there's a **strong sense of harmonising priorities in leadership?**

Yes...

And maybe that there's an evolving edge of leadership? Being able to harmonise delivery, profit, commercial thinking. All that alongside collective responsibility and social responsibility...

Yes.

Will that become essential to what's considered good leadership in organisations? And do you think we're **close to seeing that integrated in organisations?**

Yes, it already is – and it always has been, I think. We can go back to the Victorian industrialists for an example. Specifically, the founders of Port Sunlight... They created places where the workforce was treated better than in inner-city slums. That became part of their brand. It's always been understood but when businesses are under pressure we can forget. These days, the ability for businesses to

impact society is not just a nice 'to do'... It's a requirement, especially if you want major investment funds to invest in your business. By way of example, we recently persuaded the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund to invest in us. They have an incredibly high bar, and it took a delegation going to see them to explain what we're doing...

In terms of?

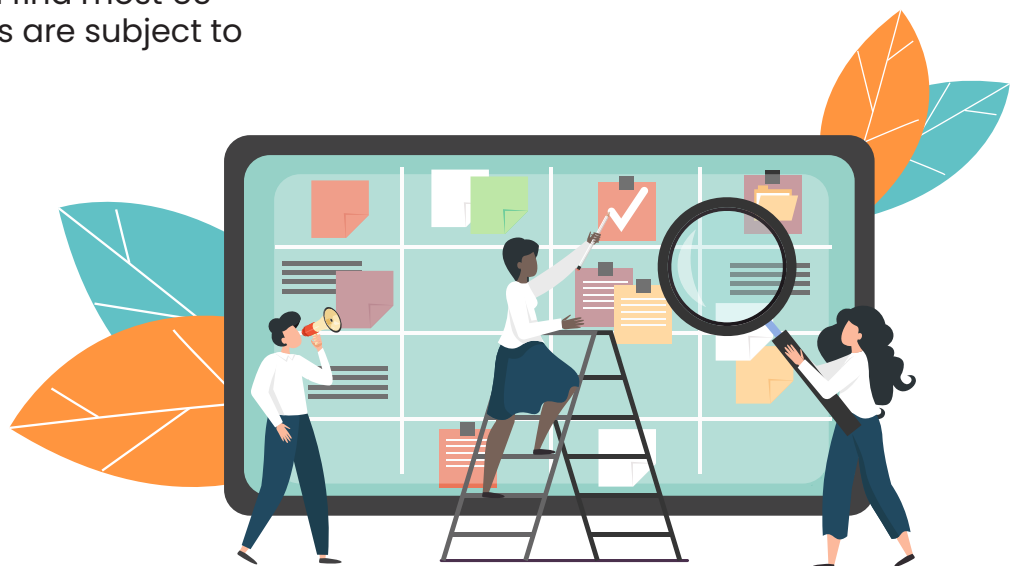
In terms of sustainability, educating our people; having free college education in stores and so on. Getting them to believe in us – and then invest in us – tells other organisations that this is a good company. So it won't be long before there's government legislation to make sure we're doing the right thing... The right thing for communities, society; the planet – and to increase the amount of

women-owned businesses that we work with too.

On the legal side, the compliance side, we also can't allow – of course – our supply chain to involve, say, the use of slaves in shrimping boats in Thailand. We have to invest, and are happy to invest, an awful lot of effort to make sure that we're doing the right thing.

But not just the leaders...

In order for that to be real, it has to be instilled all the way down to the roots of the company... Because it's just as easy to take a bribe in a store as it is to take a bribe to build a store! And it's not just that it's the right thing to do. It's required. You'll find most US-registered companies are subject to laws enforcing it.



Thanks, James, that's really helpful framing around the structural side; the social responsibility scaffolding, as well as right action. I do wonder where the person is. Whether a leader's aspiration is as much about flourishing as a human being as it is prospering and delivering as an employee – and how they can be supported in achieving that harmony... Do you think there's anything in that?

Yes, those two things are incredibly linked. Also, our ability to flourish even in the worst possible circumstances. I was listening to a blog the other night about a guy... In short, he'd been on death row for something like 60 years, and in solitary confinement for 24. He's recently been released – and he's the most wise and beautiful person. Just listening to him was magical. It shows that you can surpass your context by your inner desire to be the best human being you can possibly be. On the whole, however, we put ourselves in the context which allow ourselves to be that. And so there are some that won't work for Walmart, because we're a giant capitalist organisation.

Can you give us an example of the **importance of context and it aligning with personal values?**

I've just had an issue in my team. For one of my team members, simply being in Arkansas is difficult. She's the mother of a transgender child and – well... This state's efforts to remove the rights she currently has are incredibly upsetting to her. So Walmart is doing everything it can to help her. If we

don't, she'll go somewhere else. In the work environment, these values of flourishing and delivering are closely related. So those that come to an organisation, but don't share its values, will probably only succeed for a short period.

They won't succeed for long? **They won't achieve in the long term?**

Right. Ultimately, they'll flare out because they don't feel they belong... They don't feel part of the community. They may have made a lot of money, but they'll go off to be a mercenary somewhere else. I want Walmart to be a place where you can thrive and be yourself and be commercially successful. Because otherwise we won't be commercially successful.

You mentioned people's rights earlier. Do you think leaders in organisations have the right not to engage with matters of the public good? For example, you have programmes in place such as regeneration... How do you feel about those who say, "I've got delivery targets! I'm struggling to balance my home and work lives with everything else... This is one step too many. I can't and I won't go there." How do you respond to that?

We think about this a lot, because we expect a great deal of individuals, and some things are non-negotiable. You have no right to mistreat people. You have no right to discriminate, no right not to recognise and help someone who is different from you.

These are some of the things the company requires. There are some beliefs and behaviours which, if you hold or do them would mean you're out... Or don't hold or do them as the case may be. So any kind of sexual misconduct, any kind of offhand remark to someone of a different gender: you're gone.

You have some duties and responsibilities but there's also things which you are obviously getting at, which are optional, which we believe in strongly, but we don't want to enforce. Our job is to make people want to do those things but, equally, to understand that people are very busy. Sometimes we say: "Let's not just do or push that right now, because these times are really hard for business, high inflation, all kinds of different customer issues, gas prices, etcetera." So at times we pull back a little, at others we push harder.





By way of example, when might you choose to push harder?

I always push harder with my groups. They're supposed to be high potential, so I'm unapologetic to them. We're going through this; it's a high-protein event so suck it up! If you're that good, you can walk and chew gum simultaneously. You've got to, because these things really matter. And we want to know if you can hold several competing things in your head at the same time.

Building on this James, how do you make sure leaders don't get lost in a big system like yours? **How do they find their place?**

I don't think everyone does in any system... I think some, inevitably, will just think, "This isn't really what I want to do. I don't want to work this hard" or "I don't want to have the focus of my life be what people buy!" During the Covid lock down, I think people found themselves in different ways. I thought I was the ultimate extrovert, for example, and then I realised that I really enjoy working on my own too. So I found myself in a slightly different way. I think there are a lot of organisations also having to pay attention to who they are. They're having ask themselves how they might adjust to be the right place for a broad range of people.

For instance, if – in the past – you were working in a bank, it was possible to be of a certain type, have a certain education, a certain gender and a certain outlook on life and aspirations to wealth... Nowadays, organisations like that are finding they need to change to succeed. They need to be a safe, growing place for very different people.

This is true in many organisations... I'm taking a group up to Washington DC in a month's time, and we're going to expose them to a lot of different

institutions. They're going to have to almost lobby with Republican and Democrat lawmakers... And it used to be that the Republicans loved Walmart, and Democrats didn't. Now the Republicans think we're woke, so there's going to be a tough few days for the group. We're also going to the Pentagon. The Pentagon needs to recruit 52,000 people a year into the army alone... They're at about 11,000 so far this year*. They don't think they're going to get anywhere near even 25,000! So even the largest army on the planet now has to think about how they become more welcoming to different people.

Every institution should be having that inner conversation... And every individual should be thinking, "Who do I want to be? Where's the best place for me? How do I be who I want to be?" There are lots of people in Walmart that would love us to be a place for a rainbow. And we're so huge, with so many different jobs, that it should be possible. But often, that's not how we're seen from the outside. So how do you do that? How do you get the people that could make it different come to the company to make it different? It's a huge topic of conversation.

It certainly is, and a fabulous one. James, I'm wondering – as a final question – **what's required of you to deal with the complexities you've named today? And how can you stay receptive to what's yet to come?**

Actually, that's a relatively easy question because it's on my mind all the time! So, my job is to illustrate the complexities; to bring them to life to large groups of Walmart executives. That way, they can see them and welcome them – and not mind struggling with them! The reason it's easy for me to answer that is illustrated in the complexities of that trip to Washington...

In the past – with a culture like Walmart's – any sort of training had to have an outcome. It had to be: "I can now do X and Y, and X and Y are

directly related to my job." And that's fine for some levels of the company or some specialist organisations... But in the programmes I'm lucky enough to be responsible for, my job is to show those challenges. It's my job to illustrate the ambiguities and the dichotomies, and leave it with them. I say to them, "This is life for you now... And we're going to introduce you to people who have either dealt with these issues, or are currently struggling to deal with them, so you can get a sense of the possibilities for solving them."

That's great. Your job is to highlight the complexities and offer guidance...

Yes, and I really love the fact that I don't have to give many answers these days! In the past, I had to stand out in front of the group... They'd ask me a question, and I'd have to give them an answer. Now I have the freedom to

say, "Do you know what? I don't know, and I don't think anyone knows right now. But you, as a group, and we as a community, need to be understanding and not fearing of these questions."

And again, because these issues are so important, **can you give me an example?**

I can give you a perfect and highly contentious example. A big one for Walmart right now is women's reproductive rights. What's our stand on the Dobbs decision, which undid Roe v. Wade? That's a perfect example of getting people to see from both sides, and understand that it's not a problem to solve. It's a problem to

manage. People are often clearly on one side or the other, and the way they look over the fence is... Well, with a great deal of disgust, almost. I want leaders that are able – even in that intense and awful situation – to be able to welcome the other side, and listen.



That's a wonderful way to close our conversation, James. Staying open on the road together really seems to be at the heart of how we can support people to be leaders in organisations... and in the world around us. Thank you.

**As at August 2022.*