

Why I Left a Corporate Career to Build a Purpose-Driven Business

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A former corporate finance and controls leader shares the personal values, professional skills, and hard-earned resilience that helped him pivot into entrepreneurship.

This story began long before as my upbringing and background shaped who I am. But we're going to pick it up from high school, specifically my junior year. As I contemplated college and what I wanted to study, I took a career assessment test designed to measure traits, interests, and behaviors and suggest potential careers and occupations that may be a good fit.

When I finished the assessment, the list of results included Accountant and Janitor.

I remember being surprised by the Janitor occupation since it was the least like the other professions. I didn't particularly pay attention to it because one doesn't necessarily go to college to major in janitorial services. However, the assessment revealed certain innate similarities between accounting and well-done janitorial service -- including being organized and orderly (properly accounted for and categorized), keeping things clean (reconciled and balanced), using the best methodology (in accordance with rules and best practices), and presenting things well (reporting).

As it turns out, my career has traversed over these lines of work. This is my story of how I made the step, pivoting from a corporate career into building and running my own business.

My Corporate Career

Even as a junior in high school I had the dream of someday owning and running a business. However, being a first-generation immigrant from Taiwan (my dad came here for his graduate degree) with limited

resources, education was highly emphasized in my family. I pursued higher education in business, eventually double-majoring in Accounting and Management (Entrepreneurial Studies) and graduating from the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota.

During my years in college, I made the Dean's List and interned every summer and winter vacation at a division of Tyco International. The plan was for me to transition into a full-time employee upon graduation. However, the summer before I graduated, the then-CEO of Tyco International was caught in a scandal, which resulted in the company laying people off and going on a hiring freeze, leaving me without a job upon graduation. I took a year off to do some church volunteer work helping high school and college students.

After volunteering, I started working in accounting at a medium-sized manufacturing firm but also wanted to keep doing good and helping people (even volunteer firefighting). At times, I felt somewhat conflicted working a corporate job where I didn't feel I was directly helping people, but came to a realization that it provided me with a means to still do good in other ways and that the corporate job didn't entirely define who I was. After a few years, I transitioned into large financial banking services and started working in the internal controls over financial reporting (ICFR) discipline, which became an important focus after the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation (SOX) came into existence in large part due to the scandals of Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco.

Throughout my more than 20 years in a corporate career, I worked really hard and with dedication. I learned and gained a lot of valuable experience, skills, knowledge, gained certifications (CPA and CISA), endured hardships, earned opportunities and increased responsibilities, built/developed and led high performing teams. I met and worked with a diverse cross-section of people across the company, at various management



levels, domestically and internationally (Europe and Asia). I implemented industry frameworks, processes, and best practices in accounting, internal controls over financial reporting, risk management and compliance.

Climbing the corporate ladder pulled me in and consumed a disproportionate portion of my time, energy, thoughts, and stress. I had a drive to succeed and achieve, without compromising my integrity or my relationships and genuine care for people. I'm grateful for that experience, and I was good at it. It provided value to me, the organizations I worked at, and the people I worked with, but certain experiences brought me to deliberately consider and eventually pivot to entrepreneurship.

My Pivot to Business Ownership

Eventually, after careful assessment, I determined I didn't want to play that corporate game anymore but instead focus on building a sustainably good company -- with integrity, with good people, providing important services to our community, and being a pillar of good in the community (e.g. volunteering, donations, giving back). This was a huge departure from some of the corporate experiences I had.

After making the firm decision to pursue my dream of having a business, I considered what kind of business and which industry to be in. I wanted to be in an industry that helped people, one that was in demand, and one that could employ and work with good people with integrity and purpose. I opened [Clear Bright Washing](https://www.clearbrightwashing.com) (https://www.clearbrightwashing.com) in the Minnesota Twin Cities area. Though not exactly janitorial (like my career test suggested long ago), it delivers professional property cleaning and washing services for commercial and residential properties. Just like the career assessment suggestions, it is almost a complete contrast and opposite from my corporate career, but required the same traits, interest, and work ethic that I used to build a corporate career.

Going from a corporate career to entrepreneurship was a big change -- exciting, scary, challenging, very stressful, and a lot of hard work. At first I was a solopreneur and did everything myself: from operations to accounting and more. I leaned heavily on faith. It was unnerving to go from the seeming stability of a paycheck, insurance, and benefits to complete uncertainty.

Financially, it was challenging. I had worked really hard my entire adult life, both in my full-time job, and at times some part-time evening jobs that aligned with my passion in sports (particularly officiating basketball). These earnings allowed me to invest in my business, and years later they provided a buffer to ride out the lean times of a seasonal business. I returned to officiating basketball when I realized that winters are currently the slowest time of year for cleaning companies. After a few years away I realized how much I missed it.

Building Resilience

Business ownership and running a business was very discouraging at times, and after some letdowns I'd literally feel crushed. But I learned to navigate those situations, build resilience, and celebrate the small wins with projects done well. I was meeting and working with good people (and avoiding the bad) along the way, and forming solid supportive relationships. Good people make things work.

I often reflect to remind myself that business ownership is a process. Similar to my corporate journey, I started in an entry level position, worked hard, and dedicated myself to my craft to become an expert. I overcame challenges and persevered to earn and expand on my opportunities, grow both personally and professionally, build tangible value, and help people and businesses. In various endeavors, I tapped into my innate ability and drive, my upbringing, and different experiences. I leveraged my education, training, learnings from my corporate career, and resilience to overcome various obstacles. It was a process of hard work, dedication, and consistent commitment.

Grinding away and seeing the progress, growth, and the impact of our services in our community through satisfied customers while forming authentic connections has been fulfilling, and it builds humble confidence. I've come to realize that my aspiration/dream goes beyond just having a business. It means having a purpose: being a pillar for good in our community, delivering service with integrity, bringing shared encouragement, and making people happy through brighter spaces and cleaner living.

Takeaways

This story was about my journey from a corporate career to entrepreneurship, but it is also a story about life. Here's what I've learned:

- Know yourself. What are your values? What do you stand for? What are your likes/dislikes? What are you good at, and what motivates you? What do you want to do with your life in the time that you have?
- Have a solid internal base and anchor that sustains you through different situations and circumstances. This can be faith, meditation, something or someone that brings you strength and resilience.
- Surround yourself with authentically good people with genuine mutual support/care. Good people make things work. Whether it's life, business, work, or relationships, genuinely good people that mutually support one another can do wonderful things.
- Do everything with integrity and purpose. Integrity is the core and demonstrated conduct of a person. Being upright, honest, and trustworthy is paramount in life as people; and having a purpose provides the vision, energy, and the leadership/guidance to persevere.
- Be a pillar and force for good. We can all share and bring goodness into this world. We don't necessarily need a big platform, business, or a large social media following to do this. It starts authentically from the person's core and can expand and impact other people in marvelous ways. When more good is shared with others, it builds understanding and appreciation, and fosters better neighborhoods and communities. On a larger scale, it makes the world a better place.

I hope my story can help encourage you in your journey or endeavor, and through the experience, struggle and hardships that you may have, may goodness and value come from it!