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Saying yes to purpose

Vagas: a case study

by Sandra Chemin



Many strings wove me into the Enspiral tapestry. In 2015, I was structuring the international expansion of the innovation startup Mesa&Cadeira in Brazil. A successful design sprint for Auckland Council in New Zealand resulted in an invitation to go to Wellington to attend New Frontiers, a well-curated festival for impact entrepreneurs and change-makers from all over the world.

The day before the trip, I received an email introducing me to Richard Bartlett¹. “You need to know Enspiral; it has everything to do with your work,” said our common friend. Rich invited me for a coffee and the connection was immediate. The idea of a network of activists, entrepreneurs, and companies ‘working on stuff that matters’ just lit me up.

As I arrived at New Frontiers, Alanna Irving² was on stage. “The global economy was not created by the laws of nature. We created it—and because we created it, we can change it.” The possibility to codify how economy, society, and organisations work, and then redesign the whole system to attend to a higher purpose was mind-blowing. My journey in Enspiral had started.

Several months later, Joshua Vial and I went to Brazil to host an Open Enspiral tour, a series of workshops and talks to share the learnings of building a participatory network. As we shared our experience with others, we had the opportunity to revisit our personal journeys that led to Enspiral.

Joshua shared the story of his pilgrimage in the Camino de Santiago in Spain, when he questioned the impact he wanted to have in the world: “I came back from that trip and realised that, if everything goes well, I will have 80,000 hours to work in my life. What is the best use of my time? I see there are a lot of people wanting to work on meaningful projects. But they do this in their extra time. What if more people could work full time on stuff that matters? What if I could help them do it? That would be the best use of my time.”

¹ Richard Bartlett is co-founder of Loomio and the consultancy The Hum

² Alanna Irving is co-founder of Loomio and was key in structuring Enspiral. Watch her talk at New Frontiers searching in you tube for Alanna Irving, Growing A New Economy.

Our conversations made me reflect:

*“When did I start to ask the big questions in life?”
I went back fifteen years, to when I was enjoying one of the best moments of my professional career. I had co-founded Hipermédia, one of the first digital agencies in Brazil, at a time when the internet was only accessible in universities. I sold the agency to Ogilvy, a global advertising network, and was responsible for their internet operations in Latin America. I traveled a lot and met amazing people. I was creating the future, and that vision moved me forward.*

But one day, I got news that would change my life forever. I was pregnant with my first daughter, and my partner Lucas was diagnosed with an aggressive type of cancer. The doctors said he would have two years to live. Months later, we found out the diagnosis was wrong: he didn't have cancer. But the transformation inside us had already happened. For the first time we asked ourselves “What would you do if you just have two years to live?” That was the beginning of my purpose journey.

We bought a sailboat and lived on it with our one-year-old daughter, Clara. After two years in the North Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and pregnant with my second daughter Julia, we crossed the Atlantic Ocean. It was an inner journey of discovery as much as an ocean passage. My course was traced by asking “What moves me?”

The questions I asked myself changed over time³. When moving to a small village on the coast of Brazil, in search of a better place to raise our daughters and facing the challenge of not having a good education system, I asked: “What are the values we would like to model for our children?” Following that question led us to co-found a Steiner school, designed for social inclusion and owned by the community.

Fast forward to living in New Zealand, far from family. When my father had a serious health problem, it brought on a new set of questions: Where do I want to live my purpose? Where does the world need me most? Where can I make the biggest impact?

Looking back, I realise our purpose journey is a lifelong cycle of Search, Find, Integrate, Search, Find, Integrate in which we continuously chart new territories and leave past ones behind.

As Joshua and I shared our stories, we realised there was a pattern. It seemed to us that the individuals who joined Enspiral had a particular

³ To know more about my purpose journey watch the video in youtube “Sandra Chemin - New Ways of Working, Living and Being” from a talk in New Frontiers in 2017.

experience in their lives, a small opening to the possibility that they could be in service of something bigger than the demands of the day-to-day life. A moment of Awakening, when we start to ask the big questions in life and look for others on the same journey. The Enspiral purpose, “helping more people work on stuff that matters”, was attracting individuals that were saying yes to their own purpose journey.

This was happening to people outside Enspiral as well. One of them was the founder of the biggest technology company in e-recruitment in Brazil, Mario Kaphan. His company, Vagas, was a pioneer in horizontal management, working with self-managed teams that made decisions based on consensus. Mario invited Joshua and I to talk at HSM, the biggest management event in Latin America, and we invited him to the Enspiral retreat in New Zealand, our annual network gathering. We developed a deep sense of respect for each others journey.

Vagas wanted to improve its understanding and practice of horizontal management culture and create the conditions for a better decision-making process. The possibility of supporting another company with similar values was the invitation we needed. My partner Lucas and I got excited and accepted the challenge.

So, we began to follow a new question: If we could codify how Enspiral works, could it work in other places?

What we learned at Vagas was that each culture is unique and that what actually happens is a cross-pollination, where Enspiral practices helped Vagas and practices from Vagas inspired us to pursue lines of thought we had not considered before.

Here are some of the design principles we developed together:

1. Collective leadership

As Mario shared the story of Vagas, we understood the reasons behind the decision to be a horizontal management company, with no hierarchy. “We believe in an environment where individuals can live their own values. And values become alive when you make decisions. Because it’s one thing to identify yourself with values, and it’s another to live them. The only way to live your values in a daily basis is to participate equally in the decision-making process.”

They created an unique model, where every decision is made by consensus: when everyone agrees, or no one objects. The idea behind it was

simple - anyone can make a decision, the only prerequisite is to make it visible. By doing so, if someone believes there is a better way to solve an issue, they can open a conversation and build a new consensus. The system auto-regulates itself as controversies indicate the need to include others in the process. As a result, a better understanding is reached of the minimal consensus group for each decision.

The model came out of lived experience, but as the company grew, it needed to make the process alive to everyone.

At the start of the Vagas project, we interviewed the team, and noticed the need to move from the vision of the founder to a collective understanding of the organisational model they were pursuing. It can be hard for a founder to let go and let the team co-create their own understanding and sense-making. Joshua faced a similar challenge when he decided to become the ex-founder of Enspiral.

Mario understood the importance of making it a Vagas project and said yes to the challenge. A team of Stewards of Culture and Purpose was formed and together they co-created the plan.

2. Purpose comes first

Purpose aligns us as individuals and can powerfully connect us as groups. Companies ‘driven by purpose’ are common these days, but there is a difference between having a purpose and having a shared purpose that makes sense for all, drives decisions, and becomes a practice. Vagas already had a purpose, but it was not clearly articulated. The goal the team defined was to improve the understanding, embodying, and practice of the purpose. They recognised the need for strong shared understanding of the bigger reasons why they made the choices they made as a company. Only by understanding **their big why** could they hope to improve their decision-making process.

3. Design for trust and safety

In the report “What makes a team effective at Google?”⁴, Google researchers found out that who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions. They identified that the single most important dynamic of

⁴ You can read the full report here - <https://rework.withgoogle.com/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness/steps/introduction/>

successful teams is **psychological safety**. *Can I express my opinions and be heard? Can I share the challenges I am facing, both personally and professionally, and be supported? Is there space for vulnerability? Can we take risks in this team without feeling insecure or embarrassed?*

Trust and safety doesn't happen by chance in an organisation. They have to be intentionally designed and embedded with practices such as:

- a. Regular check-ins: spaces for sharing how you really are, what you bring to a project, and what inspires you. Verbal sharing, especially a brief story, weaves the interpersonal net and creates trust in a team. It also ensures people are truly present.
- b. Check-outs: an opportunity to say how you are leaving a meeting, align expectations, address any frustration, and celebrate what was accomplished.

I will never forget one of our remote meetings when the team wanted to cancel the call at the last minute, saying the internet connection was bad. We called them over the phone just to do a quick check-in and found out the real reason behind the change of plans: one of the contributors from another team lost a parent that day and they were very sad. By having space to express their feelings, they could transform the dynamic and find meaningful connection. The check-out was reassuring: "This meeting was the best thing that happened in my day."

- c. Deep listening and facilitated conversations to ensure all voices are heard. In times of polarised opinions, the ability to deeply listen to each other with empathy has a huge effect on a team. Methodologies such as nonviolent communication can help transform conflicts into positive conversations.

4. Purpose is emergent

Purpose is not something you create with a marketing campaign and enforce top-down. I have worked for more than a decade in marketing and branding and know how powerful the right communication can be. There is a huge difference between a purpose created externally and a purpose that emerges from what is already true in the collective. Finding the shared purpose that truly resonates is a process that can take time, and the right conditions, to emerge.

Having purpose conversations is important. As Enspiral formed, Joshua

had hundreds of conversations to come up with “Helping more people work on stuff that matters”. Mario gave a powerful talk on the 18th anniversary of Vagas, when they celebrated the company’s maturity and the ripeness of their purpose *“Purpose is not something you choose. You harvest when it is ripe, like a fruit.”*

Because of all the work the team did, Vagas’ purpose was already alive in the community when it went onto the walls on a big poster stating: “Contribute to a world where companies can make better choices about the people they work with and individuals can make better choices about the companies they work for. This is what moves us”.

5. Purpose has to be embodied and lived

How can you talk about something you haven’t experienced? Purpose cannot be created by empty words. It must be alive.

Purpose conversations start by first asking ourselves what moves us, to then see if there is resonance with one another and the collective purpose of the organisation. It is deeply personal.

At Vagas, we carefully designed Purpose Rituals, workshops to allow each person to reflect on their own journey and share what was meaningful for them. For some it was the first time they had questioned their own sense of purpose. A deeper connection was created, even among those who had been working together for a long time. There was also space to have an open conversation about collective purpose: *“What does our purpose mean to me? How does our purpose influence the way we interact with our customers and partners? What is the impact of our purpose in the community?”* This type of conversation requires a safe space and the understanding that the purpose might not resonate with everyone. Purpose Rituals resulted in a significant increase in engagement, retention, and willingness to contribute to other areas of the company. Vagas invested deeply in these rituals, rolling them out to all 150 employees in a series of 18 workshops.

6. Purpose-led teams

“We would like to contribute more to our purpose.” That is how the meeting requested by the customer support team started.

“Do you need a bigger team?” we asked. “No, we optimised the way we work and now have more time to contribute to other areas. We thought we could

serve others by offering a customer-centric approach, identifying client needs, and interacting with the product teams.”

To my disbelief, this was an actual conversation, led proactively by a team who wanted to champion their own efforts and do more to contribute to overall organisational goals. Throughout this process, we noticed that teams that believed they were working on something meaningful outperformed others.

Here is what we have learned about working with teams:

- **Understand the context:** No two teams start in the same place, so there is no ready recipe. Everything begins with conversations and listening to understand their story and their needs. *“I don’t have dedicated staff and share developers with another team. I would like to find what unifies us so we can actually be a team,”* or *“Our problem is that we are very slow in delivering what our clients need”*. Find where the energy is and work with the team members that put their hands up. Co-create rituals together so they can own them.
- **Connect at an inspirational level:** When there is connection with why a team exists and how they can contribute to the collective, there is energy to do whatever needs to be done. It is common to start a meeting with urgent pain points and needs, but trust me. It will make a huge difference to start with *why*.
- **Design for collective intelligence:** Strategic design of conversations and meetings is one of the most important skills of our time. One person just downloading information will kill the potential for productivity. When a team member has something to share with others, design activities to move from an individual perception to shared understanding. Co-create with the team, allowing them to own the purpose of the meeting or conversation. Only then will they be co-responsible for making it happen.

Real stories help me understand what is possible. This was the beginning of Vagas’ purpose journey, and I can’t wait to see where it goes in the future. Its purpose is alive, so the work continues as it grows.

This aliveness of purpose is also true at Enspiral.

Enspiral is much more than a network of activists, entrepreneurs, and companies. It is a container for individual and collective purpose to unfold, a safe space where we support each other to live and work together with purpose.