Why Authenticity Is the New ‘Purple Squirrel’ of Entrepreneurship

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This article is part of the America’s Favorite Mom & Pop Shops series. Read more stories

Key Takeaways

- Choose yourself by building a business rooted in values, trust and authentic purpose.
- Excellence and consistency — not perfection — create the rare, memorable leader others want to follow.
- Your “purple squirrel” moment comes when faith, integrity and hard work align.

In September 2025, I flew to California for meetings and found myself walking into Upwork’s headquarters in Palo Alto… the very place where my business story began.

Years ago, I was just one person with a laptop, trying to win my first project on that platform, and slowly growing a team. I had no investors, no social proof and no roadmap, only a belief that if I worked with integrity and cared deeply about every client, the rest would follow.

Fast forward five years, and I was walking into the building of the company that enabled me to grow that successful business, invited to join an AI Executive Roundtable hosted by Upwork’s CEO, Hayden Brown. Around that table sat executives,

founders and technologists from across Silicon Valley, all focused on shaping the future of work and artificial intelligence.

Out of 18 million+ people on the platform, I was the one asked to represent the voice of AI talent in that room. It was surreal.

The moment wasn't about prestige or validation. It was a quiet confirmation that the long nights, the risks and the faith were worth it. It reminded me that small beginnings, when fueled by conviction, have a way of turning into extraordinary moments.

And it made me realize that that is what being the purple squirrel of your life really means.

In recruiting, a purple squirrel is a mythical creature. Its the perfect candidate with every quality you can imagine. People chase them. Companies try to find them. I decided early on that instead of waiting for someone to "discover" me, I'd become that rare thing myself.

But not by being perfect, but by being *whole.*

I built a business that reflects everything I value: excellence, honesty and faith. I built it from scratch, after leaving a stable career at a Big Four firm, without investors or shortcuts. And I built it by putting people first — clients, employees and the communities we serve.

My company's success in AI and data consulting didn't come from chasing growth. It came from building trust, one relationship, one deliverable, one conversation at a time.

And I believe that's the essence of the purple squirrel, not the person who has everything figured out, but the one who shows up with consistency, curiosity and courage when most people are afraid to.

The truth is, you don't need to fit into someone else's blueprint to succeed. You need to build a life and business that feel like *yours.*

That means being magnetic, not manufactured. It means letting your purpose be louder than your insecurity. It means being real enough that people recognize themselves in your story.

Related: How I Turned a Life of Pain Into Purpose and Built a Multi-state Business

You don't become unforgettable by being polished. You become unforgettable by being *aligned.*

If you're an entrepreneur trying to build something real, here's what I've learned.

- **Care more than everyone else.** Don't just deliver the work… own the outcome. Make clients feel like you're part of their mission, not just their project.
- **Lead with faith, not fear.** Faith gives you stamina when the odds are long. Fear will make you settle, faith will make you stretch.
- **Be excellent when no one's watching.** Excellence is gratitude in action. It's how you honor the opportunities that others trusted you with.
- **Go all in on what makes you great.** Don't dilute yourself trying to fit every mold. Focus so deeply on your gift that it becomes undeniable.
- **Bring your whole self everywhere.** The world doesn't need another "professional persona." It needs leaders who are integrated…the same person in every room.

Being the purple squirrel isn't about being the rarest talent in the room. It's about being the truest. It's about letting your faith, your purpose and your work all point in the same direction.

It's about leading with humility, serving with excellence and

believing that your calling isn't random…it's intentional. When I look back on that day in Palo Alto, I don't see a highlight reel moment. I see a reminder of grace that even the most improbable opportunities come when you stay true, stay ready and stay aligned.

Related: My Terrible Bosses Taught Me 5 Unexpected Leadership Lessons

So if you feel like you're building quietly, wondering when your "moment" will come, remember this: You don't have to wait for the world to choose you. You can choose yourself.

You can build a business that reflects your values.
You can build relationships rooted in trust and purpose.
You can build a career that doesn't just succeed, but also fulfills.

Be the purple squirrel. Be the one who doesn't fit the mold. The one who builds with both hands…one holding excellence, the other holding faith. The one who proves that the rarest thing in business is still the same as it's always been — authenticity.

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How Turning Down Clients Could Actually Be Your Best Growth Strategy

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Key Takeaways

- Select clients who are a good fit for your business instead of onboarding everyone who contacts you.
- By focusing on the right partnerships instead of saying yes to every opportunity, companies can prevent burnout, improve team morale and achieve more sustainable growth.

It may be cliché, but that doesn’t make it any less true: Sometimes less is more. It’s exciting when your company starts to see a steady influx of interest, and it’s also tempting to

say yes to every opportunity that comes along. After all, who knows how long the boom will last?

I'd like to propose a different strategy, one that may seem counterintuitive, but in the long run, will pay higher dividends. Instead of onboarding every new client who contacts you, maybe it's better to be selective.

I have nothing against volume-based growth. However, for service businesses, it may not work out as intended, causing problems down the line, such as burnout, dissatisfied team members, high attrition rates and lost revenue. That's why I advocate prioritizing quality over quantity when considering your business's long-term growth strategy.

Related: The Most Successful Entrepreneurs Know How to Say 'No.' Here's the One Exercise You Need to Learn This Skill.

The meaning of growth

When building your business, think of growth as meaning better as well as more. For some small businesses, aiming for higher quality rather than higher volume can provide greater control and stability.

As business owners, we've all dealt with a client who wasn't the right fit for our company. It's just part of doing business. We learn that some client relationships don't work out the way we hope they will, and the client ends up leaving. If this is a frequent issue for your company, I recommend considering a more selective approach.

I say this to my clients, and I practice this at my company: To retain more clients, focus on attracting the right ones from the start. Let's not throw everything at the wall and see what sticks. Instead, we can drill down until we define the most appropriate client persona for the business. Then, we can tailor a marketing strategy to attract that type of client.

In my experience, this gives the dental practices I work with a better foundation for building a loyal patient base. It also means that their efforts are more meaningful, and client interactions are more satisfying.

When you work with a client who's on your wavelength, it feels like a partnership right away. Collaboration occurs naturally. If a problem arises, it's usually resolved quickly, without damaging the relationship. The client is more willing to listen to your ideas and follow your recommendations. And, they'll work for you.

Not only will the client contribute to the relationship by putting in extra effort and investing more, but they will also become a walking, talking billboard for your business. A quality client is normally in touch with other professionals who would benefit from your services, and since they know how you do business, they inherently understand who would be a good fit and who would not.

Related: 7 Ways Quality Boosts Business That Quantity Can't Match

The price of always saying yes

Volume isn't a bad strategy, but it may not be the right approach if your business is relationship-based. While there's no such thing as the perfect relationship, and there may be the occasional bump in the road, most of your client interactions should be productive and pleasant. If the opposite occurs, the client may not be the best fit for your business.

It's impossible to foster and nurture a lasting relationship with a client if you're putting out fires, dealing with unhappy team members, apologizing for failed campaigns, handling complaints or refunding fees. Undoubtedly, the consequences of having clients who aren't a good fit will take

a financial toll on your business.

However, it’s not just the lost revenue from the clients leaving that you have to consider. It’s also the time spent onboarding that client, planning and implementing campaigns for them, and likely, redoing work because it didn’t meet their expectations.

Then there’s the matter of the team members who are involved with those clients. Your team often bears the brunt of complaints, which can lower morale and create stress among your team. No one wants their employees to be unhappy at work. If they are dealing with multiple complaining clients and few satisfied ones, you may have trouble keeping your people. With high staff and client turnover, it goes without saying that the business will suffer.

Related: In Order for Your Business to Grow, You Need to Turn Down Customers

Choose wisely

A discerning client selection process will reduce the likelihood of clients leaving unsatisfied and create a more consistent workplace experience for your employees. Satisfied clients and employees are good for business. They write positive reviews and testimonials, generate referrals and remain loyal.

Focusing on alignment of values and ensuring a mutual fit creates a sense of exclusivity, which can also be good for business. Clients want to feel like they’re part of an elite few and appreciate having your attention when they need it.

My advice is don’t be afraid to turn down a client if you believe they aren’t a good fit. The potential revenue is not likely to justify the stress and extra work you will endure trying to make them happy. Being selective about which clients

you accept is a smart way to preserve your integrity and ensure that your passion for your business remains strong.

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How to Market Your Business

Without Spending a Dime

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Key Takeaways

- Partnerships beat ad spend when you collaborate with people who serve the same audience.
- Consistent, repurposed content builds visibility faster than polished, expensive marketing.
- Real relationships and referrals outperform paid campaigns — momentum is the real marketing engine.

When I first launched my business, I didn't have a marketing budget. But what I did have was creativity, time and a sense of urgency to get my name out there. You don't need thousands of dollars to make a big marketing impact. You just need consistency, connections and a willingness to get a little scrappy. Some of the best marketing strategies don't cost a lot of money — they just require a high level of intention and effort.

Here are five ways to market your business without spending money (or spending very little).

Related: 31 Ways to Market Your Business on a Budget

1. Build partnerships

Partnerships are one of the most cost-effective ways to grow your audience. Look for businesses that serve the same type of customer as you, but don't compete with you.

If you're a fitness coach, you can partner with a nutritionist

or a local smoothie shop. If you're a photographer, team up with a florist or wedding planner. Host a workshop together, share each other's email lists (with permission) or collaborate on a giveaway.

When two businesses with similar audiences join forces, both brands win. You expand your reach and build community, all without paying for ads!

Related: How to Build Strategic Partnerships That Actually Drive Growth

2. Use the power of free platforms

Social media is the great equalizer for small businesses. Currently, TikTok and YouTube Shorts offer the most organic reach and allow you to get in front of thousands of people without spending any money.

Don't overthink your content. Film short videos sharing tips, behind-the-scenes moments with your team or what you're up to in the community. Remember that authenticity often outperforms polished content.

One thing that has been helpful in my business is repurposing content. A 30-second video we make for a TikTok gets reposted on Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts and LinkedIn. One idea can work four times harder for you!

Related: How to Tap Into the TikTok Growth Machine

3. Grow and nurture your email list

Your email list is the most valuable marketing asset because it's all yours. Social media platforms can change their algorithms overnight, but your list gives you direct access to your audience through their inboxes.

Start collecting email addresses as soon as possible. Add a signup form to your website and social media bios, and offer something in return, such as a discount code, a free e-book or a mini course.

Once people are on your email list, stay consistent. Send regular updates, tips or insights that make them look forward to hearing from you.

Related: How to Get Your First 1,000 Email Subscribers (The Smart Way)

4. Share your voice

Visibility builds credibility, and there are so many ways to share your expertise.

Start by pitching yourself as a guest on podcasts that reach your target audience. You'll get exposure to new listeners and position yourself as an authority. Or, start your own show. There are free and low-cost hosting platforms to help you publish your podcast for under $100 a month.

If you prefer writing, contribute articles to local publications or industry blogs. If you're more comfortable speaking, offer to speak at community events, meetups or conferences. These opportunities give you a captive audience and can drive new clients to your business. (Pro tip: end your presentation with a QR code that links directly to your email signup or freebie.)

5. Engage your community and encourage word of mouth

The most powerful marketing tool still comes down to relationships. Get involved in your community, whether that's through volunteering, joining a local business group or

partnering with a nonprofit. When people know and trust you, they'll naturally want to support you.

And don't be shy about asking for referrals and reviews. Most happy clients are glad to share your name; they just need a little nudging. Send a quick follow-up email or text asking for a Google review or testimonial. Those words from real customers are more persuasive than any ad you could run!

You can even start a small referral program. Offer a discount or bonus for every new client someone sends your way. It doesn't have to cost much, but it creates a ripple effect that builds loyal advocates for your brand.

Related: How This Legacy Media Brand Turned Community Impact Into a Competitive Advantage — and How Your Business Can, Too

At the end of the day, great marketing doesn't always come from money—it comes from momentum. Every video you post, email you send and relationship you build compounds over time. Keep showing up in your community, keep adding value and soon you'll realize you don't need a big budget to make a big impact.

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Apple Conducted Rare Layoffs Focused on One Specific Team

Key Takeaways

- Apple has cut dozens of jobs across its sales organization in a rare round of layoffs.
- Affected employees have until January 20 to find an alternative position within Apple; otherwise, they will be let go with a severance package.
- Apple has about 80,000 U.S. employees.

Apple has administered a rare round of layoffs, cutting dozens of jobs across its sales organization.

Over the past few weeks, Apple management informed affected workers that they were being let go, according to a Monday Bloomberg report. The layoffs impacted the sales organization, although Apple did not disclose to employees or the media the

exact number of jobs cut. The changes extended across several teams, with some departments experiencing deeper workforce reductions than others.

Impacted jobs included account managers serving major corporate, educational and government clients. Apple also cut staff in charge of its briefing centers, which host institutional meetings and product demonstrations for potential major customers.

Related: How Much Does Apple Pay Its Employees? Here Are the Exact Salaries of Staff Jobs

Apple is internally framing the layoffs as part of an effort to optimize and simplify its sales processes.

“To connect with even more customers, we are making some changes in our sales team that affect a small number of roles,” an Apple spokesperson said in a statement to Bloomberg. “We are continuing to hire, and those employees can apply for new roles.”

Apple CEO Tim Cook. Photo by Unique Nicole/WireImage

Affected employees have until January 20 to find another job within Apple, or they will be let go with a severance package of unspecified value. Apple has multiple sales positions open on its jobs website and told impacted workers that they could apply for these roles.

The layoffs came as a shock to those impacted, affecting longtime managers and employees who have been with the company for 20 or 30 years, per Bloomberg. The last time Apple made cuts was in 2024, when the company let go of at least 600 workers on its scrapped self-driving car project and about 100 employees who worked on the Apple Books app and Apple News.

Layoffs affect more people at other tech giants. Last month, Amazon laid off 14,000 corporate staff, one of the largest job cuts in its history, while earlier this year, Microsoft cut over 15,000 employees.

Related: ‘Most Powerful Yet’: Apple Revealed the iPhone 17, iPhone Air, and AirPods With Live Translation

Apple layoffs are relatively rare. Apple CEO Tim Cook said in February 2023 that he viewed layoffs as “a last resort kind of thing.”

“You can never say never,” Cook said at the time. “We want to manage costs in other ways to the degree that we can.”

Apple has about 80,000 U.S. employees. The company passed the $4 trillion valuation mark last month, joining giants like Nvidia in the exclusive club.

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This Is the Leadership Trap No One Talks About — and How to Escape It

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Key Takeaways

- Leadership theory matters only when applied in practice. Action, not learning alone, creates real progress.
- Clear goals turn frameworks into measurable results.
- Leaders can overcome barriers by starting small and integrating learning daily — true leadership is defined by consistent action, not knowledge.

Talking about leadership is easy, but living it is the real test. Countless books and motivational speeches explain how leaders should decide, delegate or inspire. Yet, until these ideas are put into practice, they remain theory. Frameworks give you a map, but unless you step onto the road, you're still standing still.

Frameworks are powerful guides, especially within the leadership realm. They provide a bridge (a solution) from where you are to where you want to go. But as mentioned below, without them being put into practice, they remain a theory. For example, with the leaders today, there are generally two types of personality (or approaches):

1. **The victim**: The individual who's constantly on the back foot. Every time they are faced with an uncomfortable situation, they blame the outside world. And even when given the framework on how to approach their situation, they remain distracted by the problem rather than the solution.

2. **The architect**: Then there's the architect. This individual is proactive, and just like an architect looks for design ideas to implement, they constantly look for and implement improvements, instead of waiting for bad times to trail last-minute solutions.

This article explores how to move from studying leadership frameworks to implementing them in real-life situations, the barriers leaders face in doing so, and strategies to ensure theory translates into action. In other words, how to become an architect in leadership.

Related: The 3-Step Framework to Lead with Clarity and Confidence

From frameworks to action

Leadership frameworks around risk mitigation, decision-making and collaboration are powerful tools, but they only matter if they are used. A risk framework may outline potential problems, but unless a leader applies it to an actual launch or hiring decision, it remains just a plan on paper.

Consider a startup leader preparing to release a new app. They've identified potential challenges such as server

overload, poor user adoption or compliance issues. Instead of keeping this as a theoretical list, they take action: building a small test version for a limited audience, monitoring adoption and addressing server stress points. This mirrors the lean startup approach, which argues that frameworks only become effective when validated through real-world testing rather than theory alone.

The importance of action

Frameworks alone can create a false sense of progress. Leaders often feel accomplished after attending a seminar or reading a case study, but unless they act, their organizations see no change.

For example, consider a manager learning about collaborative decision-making. If they keep this knowledge theoretical, team meetings may remain dominated by one or two voices. But if they actively introduce a new process (i.e. understanding the two polar opposite opinions in a meeting, then working towards the middle), the framework suddenly becomes practical. The result is not only broader input but also stronger buy-in from the team.

Overcoming challenges in implementation

If turning theory into practice were simple, every leader would excel. But real-world leadership often encounters different barriers. These may include:

1. Lack of clear objectives

When frameworks are used without defined goals, teams lose direction. Leaders can overcome this by setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable and Time-bound) goals. These goals should be clear, measurable targets that keep everyone

aligned. Instead of saying “reduce risk,” they might say, “cut customer complaints by 20% within three months.”

2. Resistance to change

Employees may hesitate to embrace new frameworks. One way around this is to pilot the framework on a small project, demonstrate its success and then expand. When teams see it working, resistance fades.

3. Time and resource pressures

Leaders often feel too busy to apply frameworks because of daily operations. The solution is to embed them into existing workflows. For example, a decision-making model can be tested in the next weekly meeting rather than waiting for a long planning session.

Bringing it all together

Moving from theory to practice requires conscious effort. Leaders can:

- Set SMART goals to tie frameworks to measurable outcomes.
- Integrate learning into daily work through small experiments.
- Communicate clearly and involve teams early to reduce resistance.

These steps turn frameworks into lived experience. Each small act of implementation builds confidence and momentum, making leadership a habit of action rather than theory.

Related: Leaders Aren’t Judged on Effort — They’re Judged on Their Judgment. Here’s How to Sharpen Yours.

Conclusion

Leadership lives in the doing. Frameworks and theories are useful, but they only matter when tested in the real world. Leaders who act by experimenting, testing, adapting and applying gain insights that no textbook can provide.

Knowledge is potential energy, but action is what turns it into motion. Managers and business owners must resist the trap of endless preparation. Instead, they should test frameworks in real situations, refine them through experience and demonstrate leadership not through words, but through results.

Leadership isn’t defined by how much you know – it’s defined by what you do with what you know.

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These Tesla Jobs Pay Up to $318,000 — And You'll Have Meetings With Elon Musk

Key Takeaways

- Tesla CEO Elon Musk announced on X on Sunday that Tesla is hiring for its AI chip engineering team.
- The positions pay up to $318,000, in addition to cash and stock awards and benefits.
- Plus, Musk is involved and attends the team's twice-weekly meetings.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk has publicly called for candidates to apply to the company's AI chip design team — and said he personally oversees the group in twice-weekly meetings.

Musk announced on X on Sunday that Tesla is hiring for its AI chip engineering team and requested that applicants email the company (AI_Chips@Tesla.com) with three bullet points demonstrating evidence of their "exceptional ability."

Most people don't know that Tesla has had an advanced AI chip

> *and board engineering team for many years.*
>
> *That team has already designed and deployed several million AI chips in our cars and data centers. These chips are what enable Tesla to be the leader in real-world AI.*
>
> *The…*
>
> *— Elon Musk (@elonmusk) November 23, 2025*

Musk wrote on X that he is “deeply involved” in chip design and meets with the engineering team every Tuesday and Saturday. The Saturday meetings are only intended for the short-term and will “no longer be needed in a few months” when the latest Tesla chip rolls out, Musk said.

Related: Tesla Is Now Worth More than Toyota, Ferrari, General Motors, Porsche, and Ford Combined

Musk stated that Tesla intends to release a new AI chip design regularly in its cars and data centers, pushing for higher production volumes than all other AI chip manufacturers combined. The goal is to introduce a new AI chip design to volume production every 12 months. Tesla has already designed and rolled out several million AI chips.

“These chips will profoundly change the world in positive ways, saving millions of lives due to safer driving,” Musk wrote in the post.

Tesla CEO Elon Musk. Photographer: Stefani Reynolds/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Tesla has posted engineering positions in Palo Alto, California, for its AI hardware team, including roles such as physical design engineers and signal and power integrity engineers. The engineers will lead both chip design and system

validation.

Related: Tesla CEO Elon Musk Shows Up at All-Hands Meeting to Reassure Employees 'The Future Is Incredibly Bright'

The physical design engineer role asks for individuals with over a decade of experience in designing and building chips. Responsibilities include creating Tesla's AI chips. The salary range for this position is approximately $152,000 to $264,000 per year, in addition to cash and stock awards, as well as benefits.

The signal and power integrity engineer role focuses on the Tesla car computer's signal and designing and validating power integrity. The engineer will need a degree in a relevant discipline, as well as related product design and validation experience, and will be compensated $120,000 to $318,000 in annual salary, plus cash and stock awards and benefits.

Musk is known for his hands-on management style. In July, he announced that he would personally supervise the new Samsung chip manufacturing plant in Taylor, Texas. The Texas facility, which is scheduled to open next year, will play a significant role in producing Tesla's advanced AI chips as part of a $16.5 billion deal with Samsung.

Tesla stock was up more than 6% on Monday. The company had a market capitalization of $1.26 trillion at the time of writing.

Related: Tesla Approves Elon Musk's $1 Trillion Pay. Here's What He Has to Do to Get It.

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Here’s the Real Difference Between a Business That Lasts and One That Fizzles Out

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Key Takeaways

- Vanity metrics like splashy valuations and glossy PR

don’t necessarily build a sustainable company — the fundamentals do.
- You must have discipline, know your numbers and hear (not just listen) to your investors and customers.
- When a business model is inherently profitable, you stop chasing capital — and capital starts chasing you.
- Startups often chase external validation, but the real flex is internal validation — knowing your business can thrive on its own.

In today’s startup world, it’s easy to get distracted by vanity metrics — splashy valuations, glossy PR or an oversubscribed seed round. But these things don’t necessarily build a sustainable company. What does? The fundamentals.

I’ve learned — sometimes the hard way — that the difference between a startup that lasts and one that fizzles isn’t charisma, buzz or even vision. It’s discipline. It’s knowing your numbers. It’s hearing — not just listening — to your investors and customers.

Related: Stop Chasing These Vanity Metrics if You Want to Succeed

Listening vs. truly hearing

As founders, we like to think of ourselves as great listeners. But in reality, most of us are just waiting for our turn to talk.

Listening is passive. Hearing is active. It’s humbling. It’s what happens when you stop trying to defend your idea and start seeking the truth.

Over time, I’ve come to understand that customer and investor feedback isn’t criticism — it’s free strategy. Customers tell you what’s working. Investors tell you what’s missing. If you actually *hear* them, you can build something people want *and*

something investors believe in.

The investor who reframed everything

One lunch with an investor completely changed how I view growth. He told me:

“Don’t worry. Once you figure out the unit economics — when you can expand with profits — you won’t even need investors. That’s when investors will come knocking on your door.”

At the time, I didn’t fully grasp it. But he was right.

When your business model is profitable at its core, you stop chasing capital — and capital starts chasing you.

It’s happening now for Emilia George. We’ve reached a place where growth comes from customer loyalty, repeat purchases and efficient operations — not from external funding. And that freedom is more powerful than any check.

Related: Why This Metric Should Be Prioritized Over Growth for Startup Success

Seeing profitability up close

After years of owning retail stores, I’ve developed a sixth sense for which businesses are *truly* profitable and which ones are kept alive by owners quietly pumping in personal cash.

Profitability leaves clues. You can see it in the inventory discipline, in how quickly stores turn product and in whether teams are empowered to make financially sound decisions.

It has also become second nature for me to observe stores wherever I go. I notice the foot traffic, the reasons behind the lines and what makes something *worth the wait*. Why does

one ice cream shop have a steady stream of customers while another, just a few doors down, sits empty? Why do some baby clothing and toy stores thrive, while others – especially when clustered within a single New York City neighborhood – quietly struggle?

Patterns like these tell you everything about a market's saturation, differentiation and emotional connection to the customer. The answers are always there if you pay attention.

One brand I deeply admire for this is Starbucks. They are diligent – almost surgical – about closing underperforming locations. They don't let ego or nostalgia cloud judgment. If a store isn't working, they shut it down quickly and assertively. That's not heartless; it's healthy. It's what long-term sustainability looks like.

Fundamentals are the new flex

Startups today often chase external validation – awards, headlines, funding rounds. But the real flex is internal validation: knowing your business can thrive on its own.

Here's what that looks like:

- Know your numbers. Not roughly – precisely.
- Build for a real problem, not a trend.
- Keep operations lean, but purposeful.
- Invest in your people, not perks.
- Make profitability the North Star, not an afterthought.

And while building for a real problem is critical, founders must also understand that *the real problem evolves*. The root cause behind customer behavior often hides beneath what seems most visible at the moment. What looks like a marketing

challenge could actually be a shift in how customers make decisions or how they define value over time.

The shape of the problem changes, but the need to understand its *root* never does. If you stay close to that core truth, your company will evolve naturally alongside your customers, instead of chasing every new surface-level trend.

When you focus on the fundamentals, growth becomes inevitable — and authentic.

Related: 5 Fundamentals Successful Entrepreneurs Build Into Their Strategy

The quiet power of a profitable brand

There's a unique peace that comes when your company's survival doesn't depend on anyone else's approval. When growth comes from profit, not pressure.

At Emilia George, we've grown stronger by staying grounded. Profitability has given us freedom — to make better decisions, to take creative risks and to build a brand that lasts.

Sustainability isn't the opposite of scale; it's the foundation for it. Because when you build on fundamentals instead of ego, the doors you once chased down start opening on their own.

Key Takeaways

- Vanity metrics like splashy valuations and glossy PR don't necessarily build a sustainable company — the fundamentals do.
- You must have discipline, know your numbers and hear (not just listen) to your investors and customers.

- When a business model is inherently profitable, you stop chasing capital — and capital starts chasing you.
- Startups often chase external validation, but the real flex is internal validation — knowing your business can thrive on its own.

In today's startup world, it's easy to get distracted by vanity metrics — splashy valuations, glossy PR or an oversubscribed seed round. But these things don't necessarily build a sustainable company. What does? The fundamentals.

I've learned — sometimes the hard way — that the difference between a startup that lasts and one that fizzles isn't charisma, buzz or even vision. It's discipline. It's knowing your numbers. It's hearing — not just listening — to your investors and customers.

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https://www.entrepreneur.com/growing-a-business/the-key-to-building-a-business-that-lasts/498003

Will AI Replace Your Key Employees? Here's How to Prepare for What's Ahead.

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- AI is accelerating white-collar job reductions, especially in data-driven roles like software development, customer support and finance.
- AI is likely both a cause and accelerator of job losses. Companies use AI not only to automate tasks but also as a justification for streamlining operations and reducing their workforce.
- Leaders should identify roles where AI boosts productivity (not just cost savings), train employees on AI systems and redefine roles around creativity, strategy and areas AI can't address.

Major business publications and leading news sources are reporting a wave of white collar job reductions. Is artificial intelligence the primary reason behind this trend? Many experts believe it is.

Not long ago, business journalists and others speculated on the extent to which AI would replace or affect jobs. It could be described as the "calm before the algorithm." Now, it is undeniable that algorithms are having a significant impact.

A recent article in The Wall Street Journal specifically addressed AI's influence on the white-collar job market. Amazon and United Parcel Service (UPS) both announced plans to reduce approximately 14,000 positions each. Retail giant Target is reducing its workforce by 1,800 employees. Molson Coors and General Motors will issue lots of pink slips before year's end.

Are we experiencing the first white-collar displacement of the 21st century? It appears so. This leaves many entrepreneurs wondering how many of their key employees may be replaced by AI shortly.

Related: Is AI Taking Your Job This Year? Staggering Stats

Show How the Technology Is Reshaping the Workforce.

Does AI affect blue or white collar jobs most?

To answer this question, I consulted leading search engines to determine which types of jobs will be most affected by AI. Interestingly, the top search response was answered by Mr. AI himself, or Ms. AI herself, if you prefer.

Positions like data entry, customer service and software engineering have seen job reductions due to AI advancements. It’s frustrating for anyone seeking assistance with a product or service when they encounter AI chatbots instead of a real person to address their questions or issues. However, the chatbot doesn’t eat into a company’s healthcare costs, show up late or demand a six-figure salary.

Think of customer service AI transitions in these terms: A call center that used to employ 500 CSRs now exists with 50 AI specialists. Old skills are eroding, and new roles that require more technical expertise are growing, albeit at a slower rate.

On the other hand, typical blue-collar roles in construction, healthcare and hospitality are experiencing shortages because of a decrease in job applications. Although there is high demand for employees with advanced AI skills, other factors, such as the current political climate, economic conditions and the supply of workers, also influence the job market.

It’s clear that white-collar workers have more reason to fear an AI takeover than their blue-collar counterparts. While exercising in the evening, I often pass a commercial roofing company and notice that the roofers themselves are not in immediate danger of being replaced by AI. However, the employees who design roofing projects may need to update their

resumes. You can think of AI's impact on job replacement in these terms:

- Data-driven jobs are being hit hardest by AI (i.e., software development, finance, customer support)
- Data-poor jobs (where human interaction is important) are remaining steady or increasing (i.e., healthcare, construction, education, public safety)

Is AI or efficiency the real job culprit?

One question I've recently asked myself is whether AI is the cause or the accelerator of job losses. The answer is likely both.

Practically every large corporation utilizes AI in various capacities. Large language models, such as ChatGPT, learn from processing vast amounts of data. Assuming this data is accurate, it's clear how positions in trading and coding could be negatively affected.

Moreover, companies might use AI as one of several justifications for reducing their workforce. This is certainly an intriguing time in corporate America. Managers desire sustained growth but want to avoid increasing headcount, expecting AI to help achieve this goal.

For instance, Goldman Sachs recently issued an internal memo stating that it intends to restrain headcount in the coming year. Similarly, Walmart, a company that typically relies on expanding its stores and workforce for growth, announced that its headcount would remain flat even with projected growth. Just as self-checkout terminals have reduced the number of cashiers on each shift, AI is also replacing some white-collar corporate jobs.

Next is the “bureaucracy factor.” Downsizing bloated departments results in fewer meetings and shorter breakroom conversations, ultimately reducing the number of employees affected by the Monday morning and Friday afternoon slumps. Additionally, the decision on whether to require employees to work on site or remotely becomes less relevant. AI can work from any location, allowing companies to save hours on labor without the need for an overtime budget.

AI is undoubtedly impacting the corporate workforce. C-suite executives can use various reasons to explain these reductions to their remaining employees. So, how will AI affect your employee headcount?

Related: The CEO of the Biggest Employer in the Country Says AI Will Transform ‘Literally Every Job’ at His Company (and Yours, Too)

Is AI impacting my industry?

Fortunately for our company, AI isn’t replacing our employees anytime soon. As I mentioned in previous articles, our team takes pride in direct customer contact. That’s why a real person answers when the phone rings.

Now, what about our direct line employees, the individuals who transcribe client audio and video files? Conventional wisdom suggests that software transcription programs are faster and more efficient, potentially replacing my human transcriptionists.

Like most companies, our website contains a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page with comprehensive information about our transcription services. In fact, our second FAQ reads, “Why are humans considered more reliable than AI and software?” The answer is straightforward: It’s all about the error rate.

Our response to the question sums up the issue: “Humans

understand context and can pinpoint a voice when multiple people are speaking over one another. AI and software often struggle with determining who is speaking and can make incorrect guesses about homonyms and words that sound alike.”

Since I’m not a fan of AI-generated chatbots, I don’t plan to replace my exceptional office staff. Until AI transcription programs make significant advancements, my U.S.-based human transcriptionists will continue to produce the most reliable transcripts possible.

What to expect from AI in 2026

As of now, many companies are still in the “experimental” phase of AI usage. However, by 2026, AI is expected to enter the mainstream for both existing and new users.

According to a report from Deloitte, three AI trends are expected for 2026:

- Agentic AI autonomous systems that can adapt to changing environments
- Physical AI intelligent machines that can interact with their environments
- Sovereign AI ensures that data and model weights remain within established boundaries

With the abundance of AI terminology, it can be a challenge to keep track of everything. Here’s a brief overview of these three new concepts:

Agentic AI

Intelligent systems that can quickly adapt to changing environments, make complex decisions and collaborate with humans comprises agentic AI. This process will enable

companies or departments to automate both repetitive and multistep processes.

For instance, AI agents in customer service can triage and resolve support tickets, allowing human employees to focus on more complex cases. In supply chains, agentic AI can optimize inventory, logistics and procurement in real time.

Financial services firms like Goldman Sachs will also benefit from this technology through automated portfolio management, fraud detection and regulatory compliance – all without human intervention. Because compliance is critical, AI models must be accurate to avoid significant regulatory and legal issues. As a result, agentic AI will transition from pilot projects to broader adoption.

Physical AI

Embedding AI into the physical world can include everything from warehouse robots to smart medical devices. Physical AI is designed to unleash new efficiencies and improve safety in areas where such automation was limited by cost or complexity.

Imagine robots and AI-powered control systems designed to reduce defects and downtime. A logistics department might utilize autonomous vehicles and drones to streamline deliveries and warehouse operations. Companies like Amazon and Walmart are already effectively employing physical AI, and this trend is expected to grow by 2026.

Sovereign AI

As data privacy regulations tighten globally due to increased AI implementation, sovereign AI will help ensure that model weights, data and computing resources remain within specific regional or national boundaries.

For example, our company handles a large volume of healthcare

documentation, so we must be HIPAA compliant to protect patient privacy. Sovereign AI allows for the processing and storage of patient data locally, in compliance with privacy laws.

Financial data also requires strict protection. While our primary focus has been on AI use in the private sector, governments will also employ AI to enhance transparency and local control. Unsurprisingly, public employee unions are raising concerns about the potential for government AI usage to reduce their workforce.

Related: Many Employees Fear Being Replaced by AI – Here's How to Integrate It Into Your Business Without Scaring Them.

How will AI impact your key employees?

While I am open to incorporating AI into our business, I do not foresee any loss of headcount due to AI implementation. Here are a few AI recommendations to consider as we approach the end of the year.

Instead of merely reacting to changes in AI, let's take a proactive approach and present a three-step strategy to key managers:

1. Identify roles where AI improves productivity, not just cost savings
2. Train selected employees on AI systems and workflow strategies
3. Redefine roles around human creativity, strategy and areas AI cannot address

Remember to leverage AI to your advantage and embrace new technology. Simultaneously, encourage key employees to learn

or transition into new skill sets.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/science-technology/will-ai-replace-your-key-employees-what-you-need-to-know/499183

Is Your Office Layout Eroding Employee Trust? Here's What You Need to Know.

Opinions expressed by Entrepreneur contributors are their own.

Key Takeaways

- Workspaces influence employees' feelings, how they communicate and their level of trust. Open workspaces can encourage collaboration and accountability but may reduce privacy and autonomy.
- Cubicles provide a sense of control and personalization, and they create a buffer against constant stimulation. Hybrid designs offer open environments with semi-private stations, which allow for collaboration while maintaining focus.
- To design your office for trust, you should embrace zoning, use transparency carefully, bring nature inside and prioritize ergonomics.

Take a stroll through a contemporary office. Before a word is spoken, you recognize something about the culture of the

company. The layout of the office speaks for itself. Are the walls high or low? Is leadership visible from your desk? Is there a place to escape for focused work, or are you always “on stage”?

The design of a workspace has meaning far beyond the visual appeal. Today’s workspaces psychologically influence the employees’ feelings, how they communicate and the level of trust. In the new era of open-plan offices, a crucial question comes up: Does the openness actually build trust, or does it “quietly” take away the psychological sense of safety a person needs to be productive?

Related: Do You Trust Your Employees? Your Office Might Be Telling Them Otherwise.

The psychology of openness

There is a reason why the phrase “open door policy” is often associated with approachable leadership. It is a psychological sign of accessibility, equality and collaboration. When applied to physical space, these same principles come into play.

Open workspaces utilize “social facilitation” as a tool to promote productivity. The phenomenon states that an employee’s work productivity increases in the presence of their peers. Seeing a co-worker actively working can promote a sense of accountability and perceived fairness. When everyone from interns to executives shares similar workspace conditions, hierarchical barriers dissolve.

Still, the same visibility that encourages accountability can also increase self-consciousness. Research shows that physical openness encourages spontaneous communication but reduces privacy and autonomy. That colleague who can see your screen might spark collaboration – or make you hyperaware of every moment you are not appearing “productive.”

Trust and transparency: Finding the balance

Organizational transparency builds trust, but only when leaders speak about the company's performance and decision-making. However, physical and cultural transparency should be aligned. When transparency turns to surveillance, the trust intended is broken.

Companies like Airbnb and Salesforce have found the sweet spot, where open collaborative zones also have soundproof phone booths and quiet rooms. These organizations know that transparency is not about removing boundaries. It is about making them flexible and intentional.

Authentic, unforced choice is what builds trust. When employees are free to choose how and where to work, they feel trusted, and they reciprocate that trust.

Related: Forget the 'Open Workspace.' Say Hello to the 'Balanced Workspace.'

Workspace setup: Open office vs. cubicle design

Which is better, open offices or cubicles? This is a question designers, employees and everyone in between tries to answer. Each office design has different impacts on the psychology of employees, trust and collaboration in the workplace.

The open office promise and pitfall:

Open offices promise collaboration and innovation, as the design encourages spontaneous brainstorming and so-called "water cooler" conversations. Unfortunately, many employees feel exposed, distracted and burnt out. The lack of acoustical and visual barriers makes it difficult to achieve any sort of

deep and focused work. In fact, many studies indicate that open offices reduce face-to-face interaction. Employees end up emailing each other instead of having a direct conversation.

The case for cubicles and hybrid layouts:

Enter cubicle or hybrid layouts — once maligned, now being reconsidered. Cubicles provide a sense of control and personalization, and they create a buffer against constant stimulation. Hybrid designs offer open environments within a framework of semi-private stations, which allow for some collaboration while maintaining focus.

Employees take their cues from the environment. An open office might communicate trust and freedom, or it might feel like surveillance. Cubicles can provide privacy or create a feeling of a prison with a rigid hierarchy. Designing for trust involves providing options rather than mandates.

Office-related injuries and mental safety

Trust isn't just about relationships; it's also connected to the design of a workspace and whether it protects or threatens an employee's well-being.

The hidden cost of poor design:

Ill-designed spaces or furniture lead to chronic office-related injuries. Improperly adjusted chairs contribute to chronic back pain, and inadequate lighting causes headaches and visual strain. Poorly designed work stations promote repetitive motion that leads to carpal tunnel syndrome. These preventable health issues accumulate over time.

The trust connection:

When managers buy ergonomic chairs and desks and install

proper office lighting, staff perceive the difference. Making such purchases communicates, “We care about our employees’ wellbeing.” This goodwill builds confidence more than a mission statement ever could.

Comfort promotes psychological safety. Improved workspace design allows people to work without the distractions of discomfort.

Designing for trust: Practical takeaways

Planning an office redesign? Here are some suggestions:

Embrace zoning: Collaborating, concentrating and private conversations should be mapped to employee needs, not just management.

Use transparency carefully: Glass walls can create openness as well as acoustic privacy.

Bring nature inside: Biophilic elements, such as plants and views of nature, improve mental health and well-being.

Prioritize ergonomics: Adjusting furniture and proper workspace setup training are small investments with huge returns in trust and productivity.

Communication openness: Trust will not be built by the physical layout alone if leaders work in isolation. Open spaces should correspond with open decision-making.

Related: **The Surprising Ways Your Office Design Shows You Trust Your Employees**

Space as a reflection of culture

Here’s the truth most leaders miss: Your office layout is

telling employees a story about trust every single day. The question is whether you're telling the story you think you are.

An open layout office with no private spaces communicates, "We're watching you." Cubicles with no collaboration spaces imply, "Stay in your lane." A well-designed office that offers spaces for collaboration and retreat will signal that an organization trusts its employees.

The future of work isn't about choosing sides in the open-office debate. It's about creating environments where trust becomes the default — where employees feel psychologically safe, physically comfortable and genuinely valued. When your workspace reflects these priorities, trust stops being mandated through policies. It becomes the natural byproduct of design built with human needs at its core.

The organizations winning the talent war are not just offering better perks; they are offering work environments where trust is clearly visible.

Key Takeaways

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You Can’t Complain About Retention If You Don’t Mentor Your People

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This article is part of the America’s Favorite Mom & Pop Shops series. Read more stories

Key Takeaways

- Mentorship programs increase talent attraction, retention and long-term leadership development across the organization.
- Structured mentorship formalizes knowledge-sharing and creates accountability for real professional growth.
- Clear goals, consistent communication and long-term commitment determine a mentorship program's success.

A mentorship program can bring both short-term and long-term benefits to a company and its employees. In fact, historical data from top companies shows its growing importance. In 2004, only 70% of Fortune 500 companies had a mentorship program, but by 2024, that number had increased to 98%.

A structured mentorship program is now widely recognized as a strategic business asset. Companies generate higher revenue — and thus rank higher on the Fortune 500 list — when they have one.

I created the Rahm Foundation to cultivate an environment in which high-potential individuals can grow into industry leaders. The foundation has done wonders for my company's talent attraction and retention, so now I recommend all business owners implement their own mentorship program.

Even before they're hired, motivated individuals are attracted to companies visibly committed to career development. For experienced professionals, I've found that they see mentorship as a chance to fine-tune leadership skills and ensure mentees feel comfortable sharing their thoughts.

Related: Everyone Needs a Mentor — But Being a Mentor Is Just as Important. Here's Why.

What is a mentorship program?

Building a mentorship program for your company will look as unique as your company itself; no two programs are the same. However, a mentor generally seeks to support a mentee's professional growth, learning and career development. If both individuals can learn from each other, the mentor can be anyone from a direct manager to a peer.

At the Rahm Foundation, we use a healthy mix of common ground and new perspectives to pair two individuals together. We look for this in skill sets, leadership qualities and personal goals for both the mentor and mentee. This pairing approach increases the chances for a relationship where both mentees and mentors feel challenged.

Although these relationships could potentially occur naturally, a mentorship program formalizes the process. This is the key ingredient of the program: bringing informal knowledge sharing to the next level. A mentorship program offers the structure – and accountability – to ensure true mentorship and career development.

How to develop a mentorship program

The SMART method is particularly helpful to determine your goals. After they're defined on an organizational scale, work with your team to develop goals on a mentor-mentee level. At the Rahm Foundation, we use both quantitative and qualitative data to measure success.

Of course, information such as retention rates, internal promotions and even overall company performance helps to tell the story. But I find the biggest sign of success is when a mentee decides to return to the program as a mentor. Beyond building up a new leader, it means the program has inspired them to give back.

This means that any initiative is only as great as its people. When you're choosing program leaders, select people who are passionate about helping others, because their enthusiasm can be infectious. With your new leadership team in place, you can determine how to receive feedback, choose pairings and plan company-wide mentorship events.

Next, spread the word about your new initiative. To maximize participation in the program, work with your marketing team to produce internal communications on the topic. The priority should be to deliver a clear message on the benefits of joining the program, whether through email, a company-wide kick-off event or flyers and posters around the office. Don't discount word of mouth either, which can have a significant positive effect on program adoption.

Related: 5 Reasons Why Mentoring Young People Will Make You a Better Leader

Key components of a mentorship program

For your mentorship program to fully take off and stay on course, it will need consistent care. This is a group effort by everyone involved — mentors, mentees and the leadership team. A helpful way to approach this is through clarity, communication and commitment.

Clarity requires making sure participants understand how the mentorship program works at your company. They should understand everything from the program's SMART goals to how mentor-mentee pairings were chosen, as well as the skills being developed by both the mentor and mentee. This can include working on effective listening, building rapport, asking the right questions and sharing feedback.

Consistent communication is also essential. This includes

briefing mentees' managers on the time commitment required for their participation in the program. The time commitment for mentors should also be effectively communicated. Consistent internal communications, including success stories, can highlight your organization's true commitment to supporting its employees.

Committing fully requires taking a long-term view of the mentorship program. Since results may not be visible until weeks or months later, encourage your participants to check in at regular intervals. Then, collaborate with the leadership team to address any program pain points. As it gains traction, commitment may also include taking a strategic look at the program and optimizing it for an improved structure.

When we launched the Rahm Foundation's mentorship program, our goal was to help people find their voice and sense of purpose. Not only does it create an environment where healthy collaboration is the norm, but the resulting workplace culture has been proven to support your bottom line. When you invest in a mentorship program, know that you are also investing in the long-term success of your company.

Key Takeaways

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