Twitter Thread by Dan Rose



Dan Rose
@DanRose999

In 2006 I was meeting with Jeff Bezos to discuss acquiring Audible when he described their founder Don Katz as “a missionary, not a mercenary.” I later learned Jeff got this framing from John Doerr, and it struck me as a good distinction when evaluating people. Here's a ■:

Most great founders are missionaries. Starting a company requires a level of commitment that lends itself to missionary zeal. Of course some founders are primarily motivated by money, but mercenary founders tend not to build lasting companies, opting instead for a quicker exit.

Missionary founders also care about making money, but they are primarily motivated by a higher calling. The mission of the company means something to them in their bones. They truly believe in serving their customers, improving people's lives, putting a "dent in the universe."

I remember my new hire orientation at Amazon in 1999. They shared a letter from a customer living in a rural village in Eastern Europe who was grateful to have access to books. We left with stickers that read “Work hard. Have fun. Make history.” I remember thinking, Let’s Go!

Chris Cox delivered a new hire orientation speech at Facebook religiously every Monday talking about the evolution of communications from the printing press to the internet and social media. Cox’s missionary speech left everyone in the room with that same feeling, Let’s Go!

But you don’t even have to believe in the mission of the company to be a missionary. Early in my career I joked that I could be happy selling widgets because my higher calling was to lead people by giving them a sense of purpose and being part of something bigger than themselves.

My mission was to be a leader, and I was open-minded to the shape it might take (I almost started a log furniture company before coming to my senses). I wasn’t talented enough to play pro sports or be in a rock band, but in business I could inspire teams to achieve greatness.

I also bring a missionary zeal to deal-making. Mercenary negotiators try to grab every last bit of value leaving the other party with as little as possible. I intentionally leave value on the table to build lasting partnerships (Zuck was more amenable to this approach than Bezos)

Missionaries take the long view. When you expect to work for a company for a decade or more, or you're negotiating a partnership that is designed to be durable, it frees you up to optimize for long-term value creation over short-term value extraction.

Bezos once explained why all employees got stock options. When he was young his parents owned a rental home, and one Xmas the tenants nailed their tree to the hard wood floors. "An owner would never do that to their house, and I want everyone who works at Amazon to be an owner."

He also defended Amazon's stingy compensation (compared to Silicon Valley) by explaining the reason to work there wasn't because you might get rich, but because you had the opportunity to build something. He created a culture and org structure that attracted missionary builders.

Mercenaries put their own interests ahead of everything else. They will optimize for their own success even if it's worse for their team, their company, etc. They view everything as a zero sum battle to extract the most value. They are short-term greedy, not long-term greedy.

Yet mercenaries can be very effective at their jobs. Money is a strong motivator, and a talented mercenary can produce great results. But they aren't as much fun to work with, they are always transactional, and they don't engender deep loyalty.

An executive who worked for me at Facebook felt he deserved to be included in the company's inner circle but was being left out. In one of our performance reviews he told me he viewed himself as a "hired gun." He quit a year later and only lasted 3 years at the company.

If you look around your organization, you'll be able to distinguish the missionaries from the mercenaries. It's fine to have talented mercenaries on the team, they will work hard when properly motivated. But when building a leadership team, always hire and promote missionaries.