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Finding Balance

Leading a Life That Matters



Jason Garner

Former CEO, Global Music at Live Nation



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As part of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series, John Zenger and Joseph Folkman sat down with Jason Garner, former CEO of Global Music at Live Nation, a *Fortune* 500 concert-booking firm.

Jason rose from a childhood of poverty to #15 on *Fortune* magazine's list of highest-paid executives under 40. He recently quit the corporate lifestyle in an effort to find balance in his life.

Jason spends his days practicing yoga and meditation; consulting athletes, entertainers, and business people; blogging; and public speaking. Jason is the author of *And I Breathed: My Journey from a Life of Matter to a Life That Matters*.

This eBook is a brief summary of that conversation. Listen to the podcast for the full conversation.

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When did you make this change in direction?

It came on the heels of my mother's death about five years ago. It started with me taking time off from business and sitting with her as she took her last breaths in my arms.

That experience was probably the first time in my life that I was able to stop the hamster wheel and realize that there was something deeper to me than just work. This experience sparked a curiosity in me that started me on this journey.

You started as a parking attendant and went on to become a CEO. Could you tell us about that journey?

We grew up poor. My father abandoned the family when I was really young. My mother was a single mom raising two kids while working as a daycare teacher and caregiver. She put so much of herself into the world with very little financial reward.

I remember, as a child, there being a lot of pain around the idea of money. My young brain thought, "The way to solve this is to make a lot of it."

For as long as I can remember, I was doing some kind of business. When I was four years old, I washed dishes at the children's home where my



mother worked to make a couple of quarters to feel like I was contributing. When I was in middle school, I would have my mom drop me off at 7-Eleven before school so I could buy a pack of gum. I would then sell each piece individually to make enough money to pay for lunch so I didn't have to get the free lunch and stand in that line, which for me carried the stigma of poverty.

I eventually worked at a flea market, first as a parking attendant, and ended up managing that business and starting many businesses of my own selling odds and ends at that flea market.

In many ways, this was my business school. Along the way I started booking bands on the patio to entice customers to stop and have a hotdog or a beer to help increase revenue. This led me to music and I started my own concert-booking company that eventually caught the eye of Clear Channel Entertainment.

I went to work for Clear Channel, and as luck would have it, I moved into an empty office next to the corner office occupied by Michael Rapino, the then-CEO of Clear Channel for Europe. Michael went on to spin Live Nation out of Clear Channel and I became his right-hand man. In many ways he was my mentor, leader, and first guru who took the unpolished, scrappy, flea-market entrepreneur and taught me how to become an executive.

I just described thirty-seven years in a few sentences, but this is the journey to that point in my life.

As you reflect back on that journey, what are the leadership skills and lessons you learned that might be of value to others?

The first lesson I learned is that we are not trapped in our stories. The story of my family was one of poverty and lack and being at the whim of the world and those around us.

I learned early on that the only way I would be successful is if I had the courage to rewrite that story. I think that we all can rewrite our stories. At any moment there is always time to turn around, pause, breathe, make a U-turn, rip up the book, and start over.



The second lesson I learned is having the courage to try things. I often get asked, “How do I break into this industry?” Or, “How do I get started in business?”

For me the answer was just to do it. I think we often spend a lot of time thinking and planning, when, in the early stages of life or any venture, there’s so much more value in just taking some steps and not being afraid that you’ll make some mistakes and stumble.

You talked about innovation and taking steps, but are you still scrappy?

I think the big misunderstanding about meditation or spirituality is that we lose the innate business senses of entrepreneurs, when in reality, both the warrior and the monk characteristics exist in all of us.

In the last five years I let the monk out of its cage and began to nurture both sides of me. When I’m in a situation that requires the scrappy, aggressive entrepreneur, I know I have that tool. When I’m in a situation that requires sensitivity and serenity, I have that tool.

I think that balance of warrior and monk brings true success and true power.

What do you miss about your former role as CEO of a *Fortune* 500 firm?

I miss the day-to-day connections with people. This is also the thing that, looking back, I wish I could have done better.

I think that as business leaders we have such a unique opportunity, actually a unique invitation, to be so much more than people who just push a business down the road. We have the opportunity to connect with people and touch people’s lives.

For so much of my life I was struggling to overcome the fear and insecurity of not having money and of not being good enough that I missed those opportunities to truly connect with the hearts of the people around me.

I would tell the younger me to pause, to believe in myself, and to believe that beyond the business strategy there's a role for my heart in business.

Which specific skills have you noticed that separate the amazing individuals from the average individuals?

I think there is a big role in business for confidence. I had a business mentor who used to say, "Don't censor yourself." What he was really saying is that you should have the confidence to say what you're feeling and to do what you think is right.

So often the stories we carry—the fears and insecurities—become overwhelming and we start to make ourselves a little smaller and a little smaller. And this has a cumulative effect. Before long we are minuscule and we can't recognize ourselves.

I think the truly great people in business have that confidence to boldly step out, knowing they might fall, and that it is okay to fall and to get back up.

What advice would you give business leaders who are struggling with the rat race and being overwhelmed?

I don't like to give advice. I remember when I was the scrappy entrepreneur and how much I hated people who thought they knew better than me telling me what to do.

I tend to do two things: I like to share and I like to ask questions that allow people to arrive at their own conclusions. One of the questions that I love to ask is simply, "What are you building?"

None of us in business sets out to be a bully. None of us sets out to be a jerk. None of us sets out to kill ourself. None of us sets out to have multiple divorces, have disease, and to not know our children. And yet so many of us end up with one, many, or all those boxes checked.



When I look at my daily practices, if they don't include caring for myself, giving me time to breathe, or giving me space to love my family, I have to realize that what I'm building includes all of those negative things that we don't want in our lives.

We get up every day and take certain steps. Where are those steps leading us? If those steps are leading us to quicksand, it is easy to take a left turn and start building something new.

In hindsight, can you envision a path that would have enabled you to have enjoyed your role of CEO and still have some of the same rewards you are finding in your current life?

When we hear the word "balance," it starts to get scary because we think of balance in a quantitative sense. If I spend ten hours at the office, I've got to spend ten hours on something else. $10+10 = 20$. So I can sleep for four hours.

In my experience, that's not the way it works. Some activities—like meditation, our diets, and connecting with our families—are so powerful and so overwhelmingly great for our beings, but they take just little doses of our time throughout the day.

Caring for ourselves while caring for our businesses can look like twenty minutes of meditation a day, an hourly reminder to take a deep breath, or setting the phone down and looking our children in the eyes. Balance doesn't have to be ten hours on and ten hours off.

Your life can be described as Old Jason/ New Jason. What are the strengths of New Jason?

I was always good at connecting. I didn't go to college, so I literally came out of the flea market and into business. I was good at walking into a room and figuring out how to connect with people.

I wasn't so good at figuring out how to connect with myself. The biggest change in me is that I've taken time to become aware of myself and to understand what makes me tick. This has definitely led to increased happiness and made me more effective in the business ventures I'm involved in.



What is the impact of a senior person in an organization possessing some of these ideas, perspectives, and philosophies? Does this cascade down through the organization?

As business leaders look at their legacies, we all have this opportunity to be truly great leaders, not only to deliver for shareholders, which is definitely important, but we have the ability to touch hearts and to lead people. At the end of the day, there's not a company. At the end of the day there's a product or a service, an infrastructure, and then there's just people. It is such a beautiful thing to think, "I don't lead a company; I lead human beings." And in the course of leading those human beings, we have the opportunity to touch so many lives.

Mark Benioff (CEO of Salesforce.com) once said that he goes to work every day and tries to make one person happy. And I thought, "Boy, at the end of a forty-year career that's one hell of a legacy. Sign me up for that one."

Tell us a little about your book, *And I Breathed: My Journey from a Life of Matter to a Life That Matters*.

I have been told my entire life, "You should write a book." I never wanted to write the book I thought people were talking about, which was the "Hey, look at me" book.

As I started to learn about some of the things we've been talking about, people started saying, "Hey, you should write a book." I didn't want to write that book either because that one felt like self-help. I don't think we're in the need for self-help.

What I wrote was an honest sharing of what was going on inside of Jason. It is a book about self-love, but it has a lot of great business stories and introspective looks at what was going on inside my brain and inside my heart. It talks about the insecurities of leading, the insecurities of being responsible for a household, and the fear of failing. And when you win, being afraid because now you have to win at a higher level. The book also talks about the tools I found to guide me through this journey.



I get a lot of comments from people that say, “It felt like you were writing about me.” I think that we often feel like what we are experiencing is unique to us. The truth is that our experiences are common among our peers, but because we never connect to talk about these issues, we carry all this fear and insecurity inside us until it is too late, until we break, until we have a crisis, or until we experience disease.

I want my book to be a friend to everybody in the position I was in. I want others to feel like they are not alone.

Let’s pretend for a moment that you find yourself in financial need and must re-enter the workforce. What would you do differently?

I would continue to start the day off by getting up at 6 a.m., doing thirty minutes of yoga, doing thirty minutes of meditation, and enjoying a nutritious smoothie.

By just doing these things I stretch my body, which prepares me to be flexible in life; I allow my consciousness and mind to stop racing and to relax, which allows me to be serene in the way I approach life; and then I enjoy some nutrition and I nurture myself. If I stopped right there, that would make a radically different Jason.

I was talking with some university students the other day, and someone said, “You aren’t really teaching us anything radical.” That’s right: it’s all common sense. It’s all things that we know how to do as entrepreneurs with our businesses, but we just have to remember to do those things for ourselves.

This, for me, is the key in how I manage my life. Were I to be back in a high-pressure job, the way to let the pressure off is through these daily and frequent acts of caring for myself.

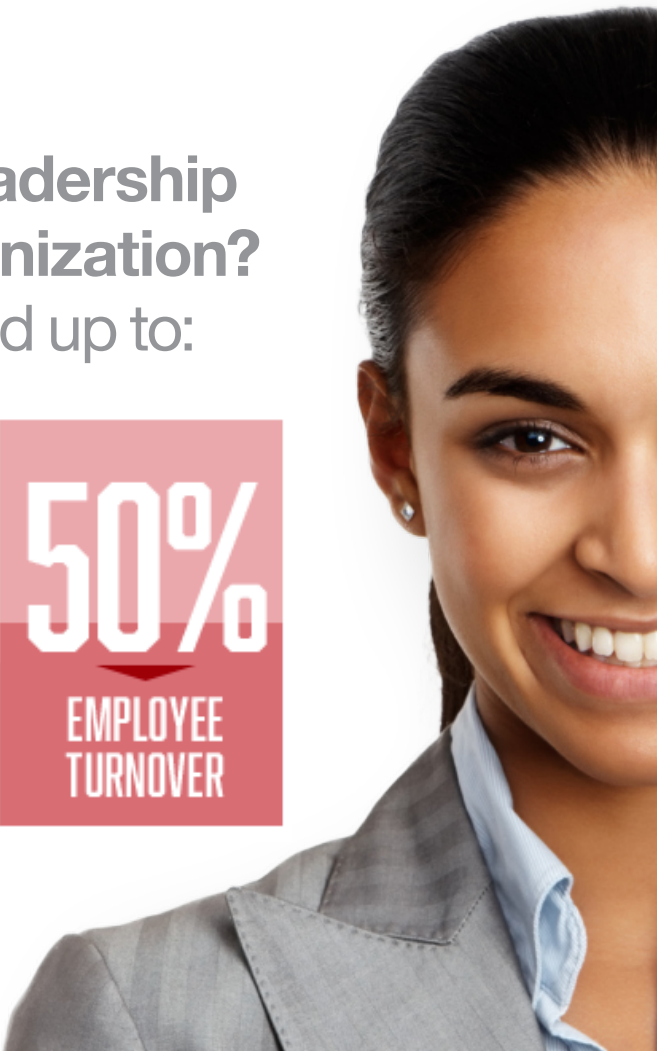


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