

Ep #22: Taking Control of Your Family Business with Matt Lesser



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Ellie Frey Zagel

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Hello, welcome to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. Today's episode is episode 22 and we get to talk to my new friend, Matt Lesser. Enjoy.

Welcome to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. A podcast for multigenerational family business leaders who want to become the leader they were meant to be. If you're ready to learn how to develop your own authentic leadership style, successfully lead your family business and create your own lasting legacy while still honoring theirs this is the podcast for you. I'm your host, Ellie Frey Zagel, family business leadership coach and third-generation family business leader. Let's get to it.

Welcome, welcome, welcome. Today's episode is with Matt Lesser. Matt at age 22 was given the family business and let's just say, things did not go well at that time. And Matt talks very openly and honestly about this. Matt is not only a family business owner, he's also a coach which of course is near and dear to my heart. He is also an author and he's right now about to release his second book called *Unengaged*. His first book is called *Unsatisfied*.

So Matt was forced to take over his family oil business, shut down operations and restart the business under a new name with just three employees, including himself. 20 years later, Matt sold the business to a competitor with over 270 employees under his leadership. So this is actually full, if you're a leader of a family business, this is full of wisdom of what didn't work and then what did work.

I hope you enjoy this interview as much as I did interviewing Matt. He also leaves his email address at the end, so stay tuned to the end. And if you have any questions of course reach out, but in the meantime enjoy.

Ellie: Alright, so I want to start off with just briefly tell us a little bit about yourself.

Matt: So I was born up in the Chicago area actually, family lived up there. My dad was a seminary at the time, my mom was a schoolteacher. When I

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was four we moved to Northeast Indiana because my dad had the opportunity to buy into an oil distribution company focusing primarily at the time on gasoline, diesel, fuel, those kinds of fuels. So this had been 1977 ish. So then a year later 78, he bought the partner completely out. He bought half the company in one year, bought the partner out the second year.

Now, it just so happened to be right before the oil embargo crisis, so the late 70s, early 80s. The company did extremely well for a few years and I'm glad it did because after that it really struggled for most of the rest of its existence. So I grew up in a family business. And as people will tell you that family business, it becomes all-consuming. You talk about it at dinner, at holidays, it doesn't matter. You might talk about other things for a moment then it's right back to business discussions, doesn't matter when it is. It just takes over your life and that's what I experienced growing up.

Went to college and studied business, I love business, I just love it, but didn't necessarily have a desire to come into the family business at least not, my dad and I just didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, oil and water for a lot of, yeah, just leave it at that, oil on water. But I came into the business after college, needed a job, so worked for him for a little over a year. And then went in to resign but he actually flipped the table on me. I said dad, I said, the conversation went like this.

"So, dad, one of us needs to go because this isn't working. And I doubt it's going to be you because you own the stock." He just said, "Sit down." Big guy, played football in college and he just said, "Sit down." So I did and then he said, "Actually I'm leaving." And he meant it. And he divorced my mom. They'd been married for 29 years, moved 1200 miles away and on the way out of the door signed the business over to me. That should have been a red flag to me, fairly fresh out of college, academics has always been easy to me.

And so that gave me this false confidence and quite frankly, arrogance, like, well, if I could do this and heck, I studied business in college so this

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will be a piece of cake. I got a real dose of reality. So now my view of education is, is that I went to school to get my degree and I went into business to get my education. A lot of truth in that. And so a little later in the first 90 days of operating it I uncovered mess after mess after mess. I spiraled into a very deep clinical and suicidal depression and the business ultimately failed about eight months after I took the helm.

I was removed, a local family friend, very successful in the business world, he and my mom, they grew up together and she was dear friends with his wife. My mom basically called and said, "Help, my son's going to kill himself over this." And I'd hired my mom and so she was working for me. And so he got involved, we didn't necessarily ask him to, he offered to. He removed me, got me help which I desperately needed. And so I was removed from the business for about six, seven, eight months, I can't remember exactly.

And it was kind of a blur quite frankly. While I was out, he brought a team of people in, they re-evaluated everything we had. Evaluated, looked at what we needed to pay, had to pay. For example one of the messes I uncovered was that dad didn't pay withholding tax for a year. Well, the IRS will have their money. And they don't care who's sitting in that chair. And at the time it was me and so they were coming after me. And I understand, I do, I understand now, I didn't at the time because I didn't do this, but it didn't matter. And I get it now, I really do.

He helped us pay them off, he gave us a loan to start over and we did. So I came back in then, we started over. There was just three of us that started this thing. And over the next 11 years, the thing, it just went haywire in all the good ways. I re-changed the focus, re-changed the strategy. It grew from three people to, by the time we sold it, we had 17 locations, one wholesale hub and then 17 retail. And we had about 180 people, it was just blessed. It was a lot of fun, very challenging. And I'd be happy to talk about the leadership aspect of that as well.

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Ellie: Yeah. No, that was actually really powerful. Obviously you're willing to share this, and not a lot of people are willing or able to really share it failed and it failed.

Matt: Absolutely. Quite frankly, Ellie, I feel like if I don't share it then I'm not being authentic. I mean not everything is roses in business. There's very dark aspects of business because it's difficult, it's very difficult. It's not easy. And you come out of college like I said with this false confidence. I didn't learn in college how do you take a business through a failure. I didn't learn in college, how do you take a company from three people to 180 and what are the leadership styles, the difference in leadership styles from three to 180? I mean it's vastly different. I wasn't equipped at all.

Basically I was trying to find anybody that was in business or whatever and say, "Please teach me, mentor me, help me." But I learned in the trenches and I had to learn by trial and error, a whole lot of error but I had to change personally in how I led and how I work with people. I had to learn what it meant to give up control. I had to learn about shared leadership because if I didn't, it's that control growth dichotomy. If you don't give up control you don't grow. And vice versa, if you want to grow you have to give up control. And so a lot of those lessons along the way.

Ellie: I am working with a client who there's so many stories about people starting businesses in their garage. And so this company is coming out of their garage. They're moving from the founding generation to the next generation. And there are people who do not want to come out of that garage because they do want to have all of the control and they do want to have their fingers in everything. And this is not just founders. These are also people who have been with the company for decades. It's a really difficult thing to coach on.

Kudos to seeing it yourself. It sounds like you were having, I know exactly what you're talking about with the false arrogance. I know I can do it, I'm smart. I've been super successful in life. And you were 22 when you took over the family business if I read your bio correctly. You're like, "No

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problem.” And a lot of people, they keep that false arrogance. I’m thinking of people throughout their entire life and they just never learn. They never get to that humbleness or humility, what do you think were the major?

I mean you obviously got to curiosity but what were the major emotions that you would say that kind of got you through even starting the business again? You didn’t have to start the business again, you did.

Matt: I think just sheer determination, just to try to build something. For a lot of my life I was boxing the shadow that I had to prove myself. And so I’d say that when it restarted it wasn’t necessarily out of the purest of intentions. I wish I could say it was out of humility and desire and all those things. It probably wasn’t. It was more of, hey, I’m going to prove that I can do this, doggone it. I just went through a massive failure, about took my own life over it. And we’re going to make this work, doggone it.

And so I think that’s part of it. I think the other part was I genuinely grew to love the business. I love the oil business to this day, I really do. I haven’t been in it for a number of years now but I’ve often said, “If you cut me open I’m going to bleed 10W-30 all over you.” I just love oil. I eventually, one of the first things is we got out of the gasoline, diesel fuel. At that end of it we were focused strictly on heavy oil. And I really just grew to love it. And quite frankly I had worked every part of the business all the way through high school and in college. And so there was nothing I didn’t know.

And so I think that helped us rebuild with just three people because between the three of us we knew the business inside out. And then as it grew and brought people on I think it helped us, the three of us actually became better coaches and better leaders. Because when people would come to us with problems to solve they would come to us with a perspective of, well, this just isn’t going to work. And it’s like, okay, back up, why won’t it work? How could it work?

And this was the part I had to learn as a leader because my natural inclination as a leader is to be very direct, very blunt and say, “No, doesn’t work, and this is how you do it, go do it.” And that’s how I was in the early

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days of my leadership and found out that that's not very effective because it doesn't help people take ownership of the problem and the solution. And so it's helping people understand, "Okay, listen, what's the problem? What are potential ways to fix the problem? How would you do it?"

Now, can I coach you on how this could happen and then come to a solution together?" And then they run with it, but I wouldn't have had that perspective quite frankly, Ellie, had I not been in the trenches and learned all the aspects of the business. And so I recommend any family business especially, especially multigenerational, second, third generation, they need to know it inside and out. The lead leaders need to know it inside and out.

Ellie: Yeah. I actually think I'm going to push back a little bit, as a coach myself, I don't know if having, I mean maybe having the experience of being in the trenches with everybody is the reason that you are able to coach people and help people take ownership. I actually think it's probably more like you were able to get rid of the arrogance and false confidence and get into a different mindset really. Because you can go through the trenches and still have that arrogance, I know it all. I know how to do this, I'm just telling you how to do it.

And that's not what you just said. You said, so you had to have a mindset shift to help you become the leader that you probably are today because you don't hear a lot of people, especially people that maybe they aren't in their 60s or 70s that can say, "You know what, I don't need to control this. I don't need to own this. I can just say, what do you want to do? Let's coach through it."

Matt: Yeah, you make a very good point there. And I think part of going through the depression and going through the failure so early in my career, people have asked me since then, "If you could do it over again and you could avoid going through that, would you?" And I said, "Absolutely not, I would go through it again." Because I'm not who I am today without going

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through that. Because if you look at me prior and me after, they're two different me. And no one will tell you that more than my wife will.

She will tell you that, honestly to this day I can't understand at the time why she even married me because she didn't use these words but basically it's, "Yeah, you were a selfish, self-arrogant prick." Yet she loved me because she saw the person that she thought I could become. Now, it took going through a massive failure to do it and a whole lot of other things. But I think one of the things I learned coming from that was, I can't do this on my own and I can't do life alone. I need people. And I knew that coming out of it immediately.

And that's why I sought mentors and I think a lot of, you know, I really don't believe there's anything new under the sun. It's just often repurposed and it's a matter of how you apply it. And so I think that a lot of the leadership style that I learned, I learned from watching other people that were really, really effective leaders.

Ellie: How did you find those effective leaders? You said that you started, a friend of the family who was able to kind of help you get the help that you needed in all the ways, taking you out so you can get the help that you needed, get the business help it needed. Because this is a hard thing to do is to find good mentors. And it seems like you were able to do that. So how did you do that?

Matt: I wish I could say it was all me, it really wasn't. I can't explain to you quite frankly where they came from other than the case of a family friend. And he's the guy actually after I sold the business, I went to work for and helped him build a family office private equity firm. He took me under his wing. Basically he knew the family well enough, he knew what had happened, he was willing to meet. And I just said at some point, I said, "Will you mentor me?" And obviously we had the discussion of what is mentoring, what is it not and blah, blah, blah.

And I will tell you that for probably the first three or four years after my depression we met almost weekly and he willingly gave me his time. And

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he just poured into my life. And then over that time then, my family attorney was an unbelievable businessman as well. And he poured into my life. And so in whatever I would observe I guess that I did a lot of reading, I did a lot of observation, whatever, go to conferences or whatever. And I'd hear speakers. I would go along and try to find out as much as I could about them, their background and their teaching.

And I tried to apply the best aspects of that to my own life. And so some of it was, yes, direct mentors. And I have been blessed with many mentors, even back when I was a teenager. Parts of it too were mentors that didn't even know they were mentors because of their books or their speaking or whatever, just learning from them.

Ellie: I think that you just nailed it and I don't even know if you really realized it. It was you observed and then you applied. And how many of us observe, observe? We just love to learn but we don't do that second part. We don't apply it to our own lives. And I, in my experience, that's the difference between being wildly successful and just being maybe successful or not successful depending on how you define that word. So thank you so much for sharing that.

Can we go talk about the mentorship piece? What was your responsibility to that mentorship relationship, that mentoring?

Matt: So it depended upon the mentor. So the gentleman that I talked with that we met weekly, he would often give me homework and basically the ticket, he didn't charge me. The ticket for my next meeting was completing the homework. And so my responsibility to him was to do what he asked me to do, number one. And two, when we met to come to those meetings with really good questions. I mean this guy taught me, him and my family attorney, they taught me how to ask really good questions.

And I'm really grateful for that because before that I was not great at asking questions. I've always been somewhat curious but these two men in particular took my curiosity to a whole new level and they helped me ask questions. And I think part of it, Ellie, is coming out of my depression is I

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had no confidence and specifically in decision making. I was scared to death to make decisions. And before that, that was not me at all. I mean I was the one that decided on everything.

And I think that's part of what drove this internal sense of I can't do this on my own and I don't want to. In fact even to this day when I started this business I'm in now and I'll go back, just a quick detour. One of the first things that I was encouraged to do by a current mentor was not to do this business alone. And so I'm a startup, I can't afford to hire people yet. And so I asked him, "So what am I supposed to do?" And he said, "Put together a personal board of directors." And so I did.

And I have four people, one of them is my wife actually and three guys that I highly respect that know me inside and out. We meet quarterly and they give me their time literally. And so I just don't believe in doing this alone. I don't believe that's the way we were designed. I don't think that's how we're created. I think we're created to do life in community. And I think when we get alone and I think that's why there's all these sayings about leaders of, it's lonely at the top and you've got to do it on your own. And I think that's all bunk. I don't buy it. And I think there's a better way to do this, do leadership.

Ellie: I totally agree and I'd love to hear a little bit more about that as well. One of the first things that I have my present CEOs do is, and I work mostly with women in family business, is to find at least five other women who get it. Is there a personal board of directors who get it, who get you, who understands, somebody you can turn to and ask anything and just they'll get it? I agree with you, you do not have to be alone running a family business. Just because it was done that way in the past doesn't mean that you have to do that. So I'm so glad that you shared that.

What other kind of leadership lessons, I feel like I could take this interview so many different places but what other leadership lessons did you learn either in that timeframe or kind of growing a business now from almost ground zero, not quite, but to where you sold it?

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Matt: We don't have enough time, Ellie, for all the lessons.

Ellie: Just give me some top ones, like everyone should know this, you don't have to be alone is a really good one, get a mentor is another really good one. Get curious and go out and learn things and apply things is another really good one. So there's three.

Matt: Great, keep going. So those three are absolute musts, shared leadership, I think that's a must. I think that too many family businesses in particular, especially the founder, if it's a founder led business, I think they have difficulty in that aspect at times because they're the ones that took the risk. They're the ones that deserve the reward, quite frankly. But I think as the company grows they have to learn how to share that leadership or it's going to cap out. And it's probably going to cap out way beyond the actual potential of the business itself. So I'd say shared leadership.

Ellie: Does that mean presidents, does that mean everybody's a third owner, what does that mean, shared leadership?

Matt: I think it depends on the structure of the organization, but I think that at the conceptual level it means you have more than one person that is empowered to make leadership and strategic decisions. Obviously the lead leader of the company has the most responsibility and should have probably the biggest voice in that. But as the company grows, you need to have people that you have empowered, that you trust, that can make more of the tactical decisions and leave the strategic then to more of, I'd say the executive committee of the company.

But what happens often is that because the founder owner knows the tactical as well as the strategic, they get in the weeds way too often or they see somebody that they don't do it the way that they would do it. Or they see somebody going off the rails a little bit rather than coaching the person, bringing them back on. They just jump in or jump over and say, "Okay, just get out of the way, let me fix it." Then they hand it back over. Well, at that point it's very difficult to retain good leaders if you're constantly jumping in and saving them.

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So I think that's what I mean by shared leadership is having the wherewithal to empower fully the team of leaders you bring around you.

Ellie: And it reminds me a little bit of something that we refer to in family business as seagull management. It's not exactly what you're talking about. Usually when you talk about seagull management, we're talking about parents who have just about retired but they come back in. And they leave droppings everywhere, make a huge mess and then they fly back away. But that's a little bit like the founders that you might be thinking about who go in and they are still in the garage and they just want to be tactical and they're like, "No, you just do it this way."

And instead of allowing their team to take ownership, to figure out how to do it themselves. And so that owner or founder, maybe that CEO can continue to do their strategy. How do you coach somebody on that? How do you coach somebody to be like, "You need to let your team do what they do best or else you're going to lose them", how do you do that?

Matt: Again it depends on the leader and the person now the leader, one of the first things I do when I'm working with a new business, a new client. I'll get the leader and the leadership team together and I will do two things with them. One is I will have them block out half a day, whatever it takes so that each person can share their story, and I mean the full version, not the Cliff's Notes version, not just their professional life, their full story together. I'm a big believer that leaders need to know and be known.

If you want to help empower people around you then you have to be vulnerable enough to let them know your story and you know theirs. So now you build a bond and a trust level that you're not going to get really doing anything else. So that's the first.

The second is I'm a big believer in assessments. I love assessments when they're used in a healthy way. Now, I've seen assessments used in a very unhealthy way. I have spent literally 25 years of basically most of my adult life studying assessments because I have this innate desire to become more self-aware. Part of my personality is very driven type A, get it done,

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goal oriented. And many times on my pursuit of my goals, especially when I was younger, I'd have these bumps that I was running over. I'm like, "Well, that's weird, what's that?" Well, looking back it was people.

And I was running over people in a way to get my goals accomplished. And it's like, okay, I have to change. If I want to be a leader of people someday, this isn't going to work, I keep killing the people around me. And it's the same thing. So I have this desire to really know who I am and know others. So that's the second thing I work with. And so I think when you have this foundation of okay, now we know each other, we know our strengths, we know our weaknesses, we know how to build a collaborative team that leverages our strengths and it compensates for weaknesses.

Now I know, okay, good, you're really good at details, you're really good at concepts, you're really good at strategies, you're really good at tactics. And we can begin to build a team around those because as much as the lead leader or the founders of a company want to believe that they have all strengths and no weaknesses, I have yet to see that be the case.

Ellie: That's just delusional, right?

Matt: It is.

Ellie: What are some of your favorite assessments? It was your explaining yourself about running over people, I couldn't help but think of maybe a high D personality on the DISC. I don't know if you do DISC.

Matt: I love DISC.

Ellie: Yeah, that's one of our favorites in West Michigan. So what are some of your favorites?

Matt: DISC, that was actually the first assessment that I was officially certified in. I love DISC. I have often joked but actually it's not really a joke, DISC actually kind of saved my marriage. I'm as high D as my wife is high S. And so you can't get more opposite than that. Literally in our pre marriage preparation, pastor, loved him dearly, still friends to this day. But

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literally he had us take this assessment and the debrief went something like this, “Wow, you two are so different. You’re going to have all kinds of challenges.” And he gave us a book to read and that was it.

And it’s like, okay, whatever. We were 23/24 at the time. And so you’re rose colored, and anyway you just don’t think about that stuff. Well, we were very different and we had all kinds of challenges. So DISC, Myers-Briggs, I love one called Livstyle is a dashboard of nine different assessments at a high level that helps you dive deep. I love Thomas Kilman if you’re looking at collaboration, how to engage in healthy conflict.

I love, it’s called Thinking Styles. It helps you build, four factors to build a team that performs well and a problem solving assessment. How do you help teams solve problems and make good decisions? I love Enneagram, so those are my go-to’s. I have several others that I use as well but those are my go-to’s.

Ellie: Thank you. I’m going to have to look up some of these. There’s some of them I know well and some of them I don’t know as well, so thank you for sharing that.

Matt: Pleasure.

Ellie: Is there anything else as far as if somebody were to walk into their family business right now at 22 right after college and they were like, “I’m going to run this business.” What would be the advice that you’d give them?

Matt: Get a mentor. Get a personal board of directors. And third is, learn how to build a collaborative team. Get to know your team inside and out, let them know you, you know them. And then build a collaborative team. And a collaborative team means teach your team and yourself how to engage in healthy conflict. I believe that the best teams know how to have the best arguments. And it’s not learning to just nod your head and wag your tail every time the big boss speaks. I don’t believe that’s effective leadership. I believe that’s tyrannical and I believe it’s dictatorial.

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I don't believe it works. And I have been a part of too many organizations in working with and consulting with where that's the case. And basically everybody is conditioned to just say yes, yes, yes. And they walk out of the room and they say, "That guy's a real idiot." But they'll never say it, or they'll say, that's probably harsh, they'll say, "That'll never work."

Ellie: No, I too have heard that. No, I don't think that's harsh. I think it's totally true.

Matt: Yeah. And so it's teaching them that, listen, when we're around this table, one of the best things that ever happened to me when I was not working for myself anymore, I was not working for my friend is that we had a big meeting probably within the first six months of me being there. The company was relatively new but I wasn't the first one there obviously. And so I was invited to this meeting. Basically I think there was eight of us around this table, all executives in this new company. I was the youngest one at the table. And I didn't feel compelled to speak.

And everybody else around me was speaking and engaging. And after the meeting was over, the big boss pulled me aside and he said, "Why didn't you talk?" And I said, "I didn't know what I could contribute to that conversation." Then he asked me three or four questions that were asked at the meeting and I gave him answers. And he said, "Never again." And he said, "If you are invited to the table you have a voice at the table and I want you to use it."

And he said, "If you do not continue to use it", he said, "I will never coach you if you say something, even if it's not adapted or even if it's considered wrong." He's like, "You'll never get coaching from me on that." He's like, "You will get coaching from me and you'll even get worse than that, you'll get reprimanded if you stay quiet." So basically what he was teaching me is like, when you're at the table, you're at the table, use your voice.

Everybody has an opinion. Everybody has a voice.

The final decision maker is often the lead leader or the team leader, whoever it is, but while we're discussing we can disagree or whatever.

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When the door opens we're all on the same page. When the door's closed, we can argue, we can disagree or whatever. But when the door's open, the rest of the company sees, okay, we're aligned. Even if we don't agree, you have the chance to speak. You have the chance to use your voice.

And I think that's critically important in creating the leadership team where everybody knows they have a voice and knows they can use it without being reprimanded even if they disagree.

Ellie: You sound like you have an amazing mentor/boss. That is not always the case. You've seen it probably time and time again where it's the exact opposite. You might be invited to the table but you're there to look pretty, sit there and look pretty, not necessarily to agree. So, Matt, let's talk about you as an author because we've talked a little bit about you as a family business owner. We talked a little bit about you as more of a consultant, and a little bit of as a coach. Now let's talk about you as an author.

Why did you decide to write your first book, *Unsatisfied*? And then you've also written a second book. Can you talk a little bit more about why you decided to write, first?

Matt: I've often asked that question myself. I think it's because I have some marbles loose in my head. Writing a book is not easy and I knew that. Literally I had this almost like this compulsion, I was compelled to write. And I can't explain all of where that came from. I had this idea to write this book for five years. And it all started when I was literally traveling the world looking for opportunities for a business investment. And I was talking with leaders or owners of businesses. And I started to hear this story and I didn't hear it once, twice, three times, Ellie, I heard it 100 times.

And it went something like this, it's like here I am and oftentimes these leaders, most of them were male. There were a few female but most were male. And they would say, "Here I am." Usually they were 50s/60s. They'd say, "I've sacrificed everything." And what I mean by everything, this is what they meant. They meant their marriage, their spouse and their kids. Those were the three things that they would say that they sacrificed, took

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for granted, whatever, ignored, in order to build this business that was supposed to give us flexibility, income.

And all this discretionary time and money where we could enjoy the finer things in life. Now here I am, the business is doing exactly that. I have more money than I could spend. I have the houses, I have the cars, I have the boat, I have whatever vacation we want and I'm miserable. I'm not satisfied because I have a marriage that is either, they're either not married anymore or they're on second or third marriage. Or if they are married, they're living separate lives. I mean oftentimes I was getting stories of kids that wanted nothing to do with them.

And they maybe even have grandkids that there's no engagement. I mean many times these were conversations that were absolutely raw, tears, emotion. And so I would come away from those with this, honestly, this feeling inside of me of okay, there has to be a different way, a better way. Because oftentimes those conversations would end with, "I wish I could do it over again because I would have done it so much differently." And I kept hearing this story over and over and over again.

And it's like, okay, why didn't they or how can we do it differently? And I was getting to a point in my career, I was approaching my mid 40s where it's like, okay, you know what, I'm doing some of the same stuff. I'm gone, at the time I was gone 20 to 25, almost sometimes 30 weeks a year and my kids were growing up. I was missing them as well. And I was having some of the same feelings of why am I doing this? Is it just for money, for power, for title, what motivates me here?

And I finally got to the point where enough's enough, I can't do this and I won't do this anymore. Many things happened, and I wound up basically leaving a job that I thought that I would retire at quite frankly. I never thought I'd leave. At that point then I was, honestly I was kind of lost because my identity was so wrapped up in what I did that literally the day after I left I'm like, "Holy crap, I don't know who I am. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I don't know where I'm supposed to go."

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And I'm not going to say I entered a depression again but was probably a mini depression. It was definitely a crisis of identity because I had no clue who I was. I then went to another job I shouldn't have taken, literally it was primarily for money, I hated it, lasted about 10 months and I failed at that. It was one of my only self-induced failures. After that I started the business that I'm running now except then I wound up going to, basically I took on a client who was one of my best friends. And [inaudible] his payroll but I still had the business.

Anyway, long story to get to the answer is I started writing then during that second job, I started writing about the experiences I had with these family businesses, these business leaders. A model came to me about five years prior to that and it's the model that's in the book and it's called *The Flourishing Life*. And it has five layers. So it's diminishing, and then it's surviving, striving, thriving. I had those four layers probably six years prior to start writing the book but I knew it was incomplete.

And so literally just started processing, what is beyond thriving? In fact, the original working title of the book was called *Beyond Thriving* because it's like there's something beyond thriving. These leaders I'm talking to, these businesses I'm talking to, they're thriving. I mean they're experiencing what our culture would say is success. We need to have disposable income and you have discretionary time on your hand to do whatever you want. That's thriving according to our culture.

Well, they wouldn't say they were thriving, they were saying they were unsatisfied and they were miserable. And so I was like, "Okay, so what's beyond thriving?" Well, I tested it, nobody got what I was saying, so it was like, there's a better title. So the title became *Unsatisfied: When Less is More*. The final piece of the puzzle came is when I was having lunch with a good friend and this is probably three or four years ago. And he used the term 'flourishing'. And I'm like, "Can you tell me about that?" And he explained it to me.

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And I became so intrigued with that word, did this complete word study on it and that became the top of the triangle. But I actually started, about five years before I started writing, that I started praying, “God, I don’t want to write this book. It’s too difficult. It’s too difficult to write a book. It’s too difficult to get it published. I don’t want to do it.” And every time I prayed I got more clarity so I stopped praying. So it got to a point that I needed to start writing. I was going crazy because I had enough clarity.

And it was really again this focus on how do you find deep satisfaction, deep joy, deep meaning and purpose in your life? And it starts by living life intentionally, not by accident. And what I kept hearing over and over again was almost this learned helplessness, like these people, “Hey, I did all this to build this huge business and now here I am.” And I kept hearing this, I didn’t mean to do this other stuff. And then the second book coming out builds on the first book.

And I have to say the second book is actually the book I wanted to write with the first book and it’s not what came out. And I’m actually glad it didn’t because I’m able to build on the first one into the second one. But the second one is called *Unengaged: Building Flourishing Organizations*.” And that should release later this year.

Ellie: I want to go back to this learned helplessness. You and I are both coaches. And this learned helplessness is, I might refer to it as victimhood. So often we don’t realize that the words that are coming out of our mouths or the mindset that we have is this learned helplessness. We think that we’re a victim of circumstance, of society, of our calendar, of whatever it is, success, whatever that is. And that’s just not true.

So I love that you said, getting to this intentionality, realizing that you do have a choice. You may not like your choices but the fact that you realize that you do have a choice is everything. You have a choice to stay in that job that you hate or leave and figure something out. And we don’t necessarily realize that we have more power than we actually do. I would

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also say living intentionally and maybe you could help me with this is being purposeful too.

And I don't know where the purposefulness comes in, in your work or maybe it doesn't, or maybe it's just a synonym for intentionality. But I feel like they're different, what is your thought?

Matt: I don't think they're synonyms. I think that they're different. And yes, when I'm coaching leaders, I use intentionality, purpose and joy. And those are the three things in your life that need to become integrated into all your decision making. In the book I talk about, what does it truly mean to live a flourishing life? And I use this, I build upon actually the work that Jim Collins did.

And I built on that because I believe that living a flourishing life is living at the intersection of what you're passionate about, what you're called to do, how you contribute value to others and what other people affirm that you're really good at doing. So your gifts, your skills, your experiences. And when you identify those four you can't help but live intentionally. You can't help but live purposefully because you're doing what you're passionate about doing. And what you feel is this inner sense of calling.

You could talk to kids when they're little kids and, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" "A firefighter, a policeman, I want to be a police officer", whatever. And many times somewhere along the line they get derailed and they wind up in these jobs they absolutely hate. And it's like, well, you say, "Wait a minute, way back here you said you wanted to be a firefighter. Why didn't you do that?" You wanted to write books or you wanted to travel the world or whatever, what happened?

And I think that unfortunately we get into this, I love the word 'victim', but I think we get in these victim mindsets where we have this, I think we're honestly sold a lie at times of saying that well, to be successful in our culture, especially western culture, European, American in particular. We're sold this bill of goods of hey, unless you're making six figures, unless you've got this, you've got this house, whatever it is that defines success.

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And so I think at some point along the line we get derailed from our true calling, the dreams that we have as kids into, okay, got to make money, got to make money, got to make money, got to make money. And at some point in life you realize, my life's half over and all I've done is make money and I've let everything else go by or I've sacrificed what's truly important to me for the almighty dollar. And that's where I was having these conversations over and over again.

Ellie: No. I love that. I love that you brought in joy, really I kind of, not joy audit. I've been really working on adding more joy in my life and challenging my clients to do the same, have more laughter. I mean you probably laugh all the time. I'm probably preaching to the choir here, but just belly laughter around silly stuff and not taking things quite so seriously. I'll share this story because I think it's relevant.

The other day I was at a business event, we're dressed up in what I call dry clean only clothes. And it starts as only Michigan can do out of nowhere, pouring cats and dogs. It was just pouring buckets of brain.

Matt: Indiana has that too.

Ellie: My car is parked in the very back of the very back parking lot because I was late. And I was just, I could sit there with everybody else and just wait for the rain to stop. Or I'm like, "You know what?" So I put my hair up, I pulled my coat, I wasn't even wearing a coat, it was a business coat or whatever it was, a blazer. And I went out into the rain and I ran that block to the back [inaudible] of where my truck was, laughing, Matt. I don't even know where it came from. I don't melt. I'm just going to go, it's nine o'clock at night, it's pouring. I was soaking wet. People must have thought I was a lunatic.

I embraced the joy of running in the rain like I was when I was a kid on a farm. And I think more of us need to bring in more of that joy, that laughter into our lives. And so I'm so thrilled that this is what part of your mission is to bring that into awareness for people.

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Matt: Helping people realize, you know what, life is so short. I often talk that life is short, it's precious and it's wild. And so how are you going to live your one precious short and wild life? And I think that as time goes on, I think that we just, some of that joy just kind of gets squeezed out and you wake up and say, "What happened?" Well, what happened is, is that you began to believe things about you that just aren't true. And you began to tell yourself things about you that aren't true.

And so one of the things I love to do when I'm either coaching, or I'm facilitating teams is what are the recordings we have, I used to say tapes but tapes are no longer relevant. What are the recordings in our head that we believe about ourselves that just aren't true? Let's start erasing over those and telling ourselves the truth because we start to really believe those lies. And you talk about a victim's mindset, I mean my goodness, that's where that stuff comes from is believing these lies. And it's like, no, let's get back to the truth.

Ellie: Even if they are truths that you don't necessarily like about yourself, let's not give them all the weight.

Matt: Yeah, absolutely.

Ellie: What else could be true? Asking a different question. I love that question, how are you going to live your short precious wild life. I think that's such a beautiful question for every single person to think about on a regular basis, on the daily, how do I want to live my life today? Can you remind me of the pyramid? I got flourishing at the top, thriving just under that, diminishing was first?

Matt: Diminishing is the bottom, and I actually put that a little removed from the triangle because at the diminishing level, it's largely people that have just kind of check out and kind of given up on life. It's like, okay, I'm not even going to try anymore. While you can change and you can definitely adopt a different mindset, I love that word, it's not the norm. Surviving is above that. So people just literally just try to survive day in and day out,

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punch the clock, get home and do whatever they have to do, just get through this day. Striving isn't above that.

Striving, beginning to wake up and realize, wait a minute, I don't have to live like this. I can live differently. I am empowered. I can make decisions. I can choose. So it's beginning to wake up to that. And then that leads to thriving. And then thriving is, and if you're not careful then thriving, you can settle in and become, basically go on autopilot of, okay, I've just got to make as much money as I can, got to do this, this. No, you don't have to, you can still choose. And then flourishing is the top and that's beginning to live with a less of a me focus.

Thriving, the way I differentiate the two is thriving is largely a me focus. If you actually look up the definition in the dictionary, thriving is all about accumulation, wealth, money, power, title position, whatever it is. Whereas flourishing is a flowing out. I've been invested in, I'm going to invest out. I have accumulated this, I'm going to give back. I'm going to live for something bigger than me, and so more legacy minded.

One of my favorite exercises to do with leaders and teams is, "Hey, you know what, let's fast forward to whatever you project to be the end of your life, hopefully it's a ripe old age of, I don't know, you pick a number. And look back and what are the three things you want to be remembered for most?" And I have yet to have somebody tell me that they wish they'd had more zeroes in their bank account or they wish they had a bigger business or they wish they spent more time at the office.

It's always about relationships, specifically family. It's about reputation and it's about how have I impacted others. That exercise right there, Ellie, that I have had, I've had leaders literally just in tears realizing, oh my gosh, my path is nowhere near that direction.

Ellie: And what I also love about this, this framework that you've created, it just occurs to me that you could be, you have probably been all of these in the story that you shared. And so it's not that one is worse than another,

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there are some things that you might need to learn at the survival level in order to also realize, whoops, this is also not what's truly fulfilling.

Matt: I think you're onto something. And I've actually had several conversations, people have read the book and they've even told me as much of saying of, "I don't think that I can get to flourishing personally until I've gone through the other levels to really understand the difference or identify those in your life." In fact, one of the exercises, the whole third part of the book, I wrote the book to be very applicable and practical. And so the entire part three of the book is application. So exercises to apply this to your life.

And one of the things I do is identify all the roles that you wear in life, all the hats that you wear whether it's spouse or if it's parent or if it's employee or employer or whatever it is, or volunteer. Write them down and identify where are you, which level are you at on the triangle? And I think that's a great exercise because I know many people that would say, "Oh my gosh, I'm thriving in my career but my marriage is barely surviving or it might be vice versa or something." That's like, okay, now you can put together a plan to proactively and intentionally address the areas where you want to grow that's consistent with how you want to live your life.

Ellie: Back to that intentionality and purposeful. I love it. I think everybody needs to go out and buy your *Unsatisfied: When Less is More*. That's so fantastic. And then you have your new book. We'll just have to have you come back I think, when your new book comes out, *Unengaged*, and we can talk about engagement in family business and engagement in life and family philanthropy because that's when hopefully that will be about the time when my interviews will wrap up on engaging in family philanthropy, that I think we'll have a great conversation on that. How does that sound?

Matt: Love it, will be great, let's plan on it.

Ellie: Fantastic. Matt, thank you so much. Is there anything that we missed that you wanted to kind of share or do you feel like we're good? Any last words?

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Matt: I think I'm good. I really appreciate the time, Ellie, it's been a great conversation and just encourage all your listeners. I'd love it if they picked up a copy of the book, that'd be phenomenal. And I love interacting with people so feel free to contact me. My email is matt@uniquelynormal.com, also on LinkedIn. But I love to interact with people. Feel free to reach out at my website www.uniquelynormal.com. I have a new website I'll be launching hopefully in the next two weeks. So I'm really stoked about that.

Last words to your listeners, choose to live an intentional life. Live a life of purpose and meaning and don't wait until tomorrow, start today. Start today with doing, I encourage people, make one decision today, take one step, just one, don't take 10, don't take 20, don't take 30. It might take 30 to get where you want to go, just take one and start today.

Ellie: So beautiful. Thank you so much, Matt, it's such a pleasure to have you on and I can't wait to talk to you soon.

Matt: I can't wait for you to, thank you.

Well, there you have it. Thank you so much for listening to *The Family Business Leader Podcast*. If you've enjoyed today's episode, be sure to share it with someone who needs it. If you'd like more information about family business leadership development, please visit successfulgenerations.com. I can't wait to connect with you again next week, until then.