

The Soul of Business

An Interview with Alan Murray, Chief Executive Officer, Fortune Media

EDITORS' NOTE Alan Murray is the chief executive of Fortune and is known for expanding its digital and conference franchises. Murray also writes a closely read daily newsletter, the Fortune CEO Daily, that often addresses issues of corporate governance. Previously, he led the rapid expansion of the Pew Research Center's digital footprint as President of that organization. He also was a reporter for The Wall Street Journal for more than two decades and wrote *Revolt* in the



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Boardroom and three other books. Murray holds a BA degree in English from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, attended Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, and earned an MSc in economics from The London School of Economics and Political Science.

COMPANY BRIEF Fortune (*fortune.com*) is a global media organization dedicated to helping its readers, viewers, and attendees succeed big in business through unrivaled access and best-in-class storytelling. Fortune drives the conversation about business. With a global perspective, the guiding wisdom of history, and an unflinching eye to the future, it reports and reveals the stories that matter today – and that will matter even more tomorrow. With the trusted power to convene and challenge those who are shaping industry, commerce and society around the world, Fortune lights the path for global leaders – and gives them the tools to make business better.

What was your vision for writing your new book, *Tomorrow's Capitalist: My Search for the Soul of Business*, and what were the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

I have been a journalist my whole life. I actually started when I was nine years old doing a little neighborhood newspaper. I always thought of my job as explaining society and not trying to change it. In the last 20 years, I have had an extraordinary opportunity to talk to and interview the CEOs of big companies which has provided me a unique view. Over recent years, I found that they were beginning to talk about their jobs in very different ways. I remember when John Donahoe, who is now the CEO of Nike, came to my office about six years ago when he was between jobs. He told me about a trek that he

had gone on with Buddhist monks in Asia thinking about the purpose of life. When he came back, he said that while he loved leading companies, he only wanted to lead companies that had a strong purpose and were making a positive impact on society.

I kept having more and more of these types of conversations with business leaders which was very different from what I had experienced in my conversations with CEOs in the decades before. I always asked what had caused this newfound focus on social impact

as opposed to financial impact. While, in some cases, it was a personal passion as it was with John Donahoe, they would most often tell me that their employees were demanding it. Their employees wanted to work for companies that were doing good in the world.

The book came out of my listening to these CEOs about this movement which was reinforced during the pandemic when CEOs were focused on the health and well-being of their employees, increased their efforts around addressing climate change, and supported the communities they serve. This showed me that this was not a fad or phenomenon. I was fortunate to work on the book with Catherine Whitney who really helped me put it together.

Do you feel that leadership in the 21st Century is centered around purpose?

A statistic that I feel helps people understand this is that if you look back 50 years and look at the balance sheets of Fortune 500 companies, you will find that more than 80 percent of the value of those companies was physical stuff – plants, equipment, inventory, etc. – and all of that physical equipment needed to be supported by financial capital, so it made sense to focus on returns to capital. If you do the same exercise today, more than 85 percent of the value on the books of Fortune 500 companies is intangibles – intellectual property, software, brand value and connection to consumers – and these areas do not require as much financial capital since they are more connected to people and human ingenuity. I think that we are in the very beginning of creating a whole new business world around human return.

This is being driven by employees who clearly want to be paid well, but also want to know that they are working for a company that is doing good in the world.

What do you feel makes a successful CEO today?

I think it is about being able to build a culture, communicating and inspiring your people, and creating a company purpose. It is about empowering people and providing the guidelines, goal posts and North Star for their internal audience. It is interesting to me that in the last four or five years, if you ask a CEO what the most important qualities of a leader are, a word that comes up regularly is empathy. I think empathy has become a major part of leadership in the 21st century.

You have spent your career as a journalist and in media. What are your feelings about the current climate today with the talk of fake news and the questions around the credibility of the industry?

The problem discussing media broadly today is that in many ways anyone can be in media since all you need is a computer. I mentioned that I became a journalist at nine years old and I would walk down the street and ask people what was going on in their lives and write it down. I would then ask my mother to type it up on a special carbon paper which was capable of running off 30 copies which was the limit of my readership since this is all that we could run. I met Gabe Fleisher a few years ago and he told me that at the same age, nine years old, he started writing a political e-mail about what was going on in the political world. He at the age of nine had something like 100,000 readers which shows that today there is no limit to what a journalist is or what the media is since anyone with access to a digital platform can reach thousands of people. On one hand, it is great that someone can reach so many people, but on the other hand, there are no standards and there are no rules which makes it very challenging to talk about the credibility of the media.

Do you ever think about slowing down?

I think about it, but if you look at this moment in the history of business, we are in the middle of an incredible technology revolution where AI and data technologies are going to remake the fundamentals of every business. We are in the middle of a purpose revolution where companies are really thinking about why they do what they do and are thinking about people and planet as opposed to just financial metrics, and then we have this rethinking of office work and how we work. I do not think there has been a more interesting time to be watching what is going on in the world of business – it is too much fun to stop. ●

