Corey Andrew Powell (00:00)

Hello everyone and welcome to another episode of Motivational Mondays presented by the NSLS. Now impacting over 2 million members nationwide. I am Corey Andrew Powell, your host, course. And our guest today is Norman Wolfe, the founder and CEO of Quantum Leaders, Inc. With over 30 years of experience in leadership and organizational performance, Norman has guided numerous businesses through transformational changes to unlock the full potential of their people. He's the author of

The Living Organization, a revolutionary approach to building high performing companies that view businesses as dynamic living systems. Norman's insights help to empower leaders who create organizations that foster both exceptional performance and human wellbeing. Norman, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Norman Wolfe (00:45)

Thank you for having me. It's a delight to be here.

Corey Andrew Powell (00:48)

Thank you so much, sir. My pleasure. just to kick things off with that intro I just gave, I'm very intrigued by the idea of the living organization concept. So to kick it off, you've spent years working to transform organizations into high-performance entities. So can you tell us what the living organization concept is and why it's so important in today's organizations?

Norman Wolfe (01:10)

Gladly. So I spent many years, as you pointed out, working with organizations. And back in the early 2000s, around 2005, 2004, I began to realize that the statistics that have been like a couple of decades old by then, the success of organizations achieving the strategic strategies, their initiatives, was failing at like 70%.

Even today, the statistics are still the same. At the same time, the Gallup poll showed that people are disengaged, like 70 % of the people are disengaged. And I got really curious because if you put that in the backdrop of all of the, what I consider the wisdom coming from authors, academia, consultants, leaders themselves who have been successful, all these books that came out giving us direction on how to be successful doesn't seem to be

moving the needle on the statistics. As I stepped back and began to investigate that and explore that and looking at my own successes and failures, and that of other successful people, I began to realize that, as you know, we all live within a paradigm, a framework, a way of thinking about the world. And the paradigm of business is that of a machine. It's a box, know, takes inputs, produces outputs.

And inside that box, we design it, right? We call that process re-engineering or we develop a strategy to figure out how to make the box work better. We hire people and put the right peoples in the right seats on the bus. That's like plugging in the right components. And you can see the way this framework, this way of thinking about what an organization is, has certain repercussions. Like people are not component parts, they're not cogs in a wheel.

the creative human people. mean, the beauty of people compared to every other living thing is our imagination, our creativity. So I stepped back and I began to explore other ways of looking at it. And the one I was settled on was what if we saw an organization as a person? Now, I've been coaching a lot of people for years. So what if I applied the principles of

enhancing human performance, what makes a great golfer a great golfer, and how the coaches relate to that, and what makes a great skier a great skier, or any of the great singer or a great speaker, any endeavor in human activity. And said, whether we took those principles and applied them to an organization, how would that change things?

And so the living organization's fundamental principle is that an organization is a person. Anytime you get a collective of people that come together for a common purpose to achieve a common goal, it creates a living being. And that's the principle. That's the core principle behind the Living Organization framework. And it changes everything. And it makes the challenges that we've been trying to achieve like adaptability, resilience, creativity, innovation. ⁓

embracing change, it makes it much more addressable because we're not stuck with thinking of it as a machine that I can design and make work the way I want it to work.

Corey Andrew Powell (04:41)

Right, right. ⁓ I have to say it's as you were saying that too, ⁓ I thought of the human body and I thought of organs and I thought like how to have an optimal performing body, all these parts are working together. So it's, I think quite a beautiful analogy to put that humanity back in the people part of the business organization, right?

Norman Wolfe (05:04)

Yeah,

it's interesting you say that, Kori, because in the book, I actually draw that metaphor. go.

the, if you look at the human body, we've got cells. That's like the individuals in an organization. Cells group together and they become organs. That's like our departments within an organization. And the organs work together cohesively to manifest the human body. That's the departments working together in a way that manifests as a corporation. Absolutely perfect metaphor.

Corey Andrew Powell (05:39)

Yeah, it's great. And I think that also then puts a bit of a conflict or not conflict, but it's sort of, well, I guess it's sort of in conflict with like the old model, if you will, which was, guess, plan, organize, lead, control, right? So speak about how those are different in that, like what's, what's ⁓ human less about that system?

Norman Wolfe (06:01)

Well, what's human-less about that system is everything falls to the leader, right? If you put that in human context, it's like the leader is the designer of the machine, kind like the parent of a young child. And because it's a young child, the parent has to tell the child everything what to do instead of guideline. And that's the way we think of it, because we try to systematize everything and put it into

standard operating procedures at the extreme. And that doesn't give any room for, I mean, with humans, there's an interesting balance that one is required to achieve. You want to create the environment for people to feel capable but challenged.

So you don't expect an eight-year-old to have the same capability of decision-making as a 20-year-old. You take them through a process over time to develop them so that when they hit 20 years old, they're capable of making those types of decisions, and at 30 and at 40 and so forth throughout life. ⁓ When you think of an organization as a machine, everything has to be structured and put in its place and not changed until it's redesigned.

So there's no evolution, there's no growth, there's no maturity. See the difference?

Corey Andrew Powell (07:31)

Yeah, and it's almost, it's definitely far less collaborative too. Like the other way is almost like a business, an organization is just telling the people what to do versus inviting them into the decisions that are being made, giving them a seat and a voice at the table.

Norman Wolfe (07:46)

Yeah, I if you look at all of the byproducts we struggle with, ⁓ silo effects. Well, silos happen because you put people in their roles and in their box and stay in your lane. That's a phrase I've heard so often. It's sad. What do mean, stay in my lane? I can't stay in my lane. I've got to interact with all these other things. Another thing the machine paradigm does is cause ⁓

the inability to create true relationships and experiences for customers. Because customers become a transaction. Look what's happened with CRM system, customer relations management. But all they're designed to do is make the transaction efficient. It doesn't do anything about building the relationship. It just makes the transaction efficient. And you see so many tools been implemented that actually decrease ⁓

transactions. I don't know anybody that loves calling customer support and being there's the menu of choices. Yeah, yeah. And it takes you forever to talk to a human being. But it's efficient. And that's the that's the issue.

Corey Andrew Powell (08:55)

Hmm interesting metaphor there too, because that shows you the trade off right as we advance with technology, which is supposed to make our lives easier. It may be actually doing that, but it's also putting a wedge between us when it comes to the human element of society.

Norman Wolfe (09:13)

Technology is meant to relieve us if it's used right. I'm an apatite technologist my whole life. I use all sorts of technology. And to me, the intent of technology is to free us of the burdens that allow us then to pay attention to the relationship part of being a human. ⁓ So if I don't have to spend hours and hours, let's say with ARI for example, it frees me from having to spend hours and hours of doing research.

I could do my research in the now and then use what I've discovered to have an interaction with somebody like you.

Corey Andrew Powell (09:47)

Now, see, I love that because we talk about AI a lot. That's like always, that's a current hotbed topic, especially in education and academia, some of our interest as a corporate, as a company. ⁓ I've never quite heard that before, Norman. That's really amazing. You know, the idea that the AI is a tool to help us actually get reconnected with humans. ⁓ And I think that part has not been emphasized. I've never actually heard that.

Norman Wolfe (10:14)

Yeah, I mean, it's happened many ⁓ with every introduction of new technology. It's not the technology is actually initially designed to free us up from the burdens of manual tasks. But if you yourself up from manual task, what's left to do? Interact. Connect. But with all tool, I always say fire, a wonderful tool that was created eons ago.

has the power to either warm us or burn us. Nuclear power can either produce lots of energy or destroy cities. The tool itself is neutral. It's how we as humans use them. And it's the same thing with technology and business. What's the intention behind it and how do we implement it to enhance the human experience, to enhance the human development.

Corey Andrew Powell (11:11)

Well, yeah, listen, you are just dropping some nuggets of wisdom here with that. I mean, I mean, you know, these are wonderful, like just kind of perspectives on, ⁓ you know, the dichotomy of the fire and warmth versus, you know, destruction and safety. It's interesting. So I love that you put it in. Those are very basic terms, understandable terms for anyone to understand. ⁓ When it comes to

Overall, though, when it comes to bringing it back to the leadership conversation, you know, we have a diverse audience, of course, of ⁓ college students, grads, even people who already in the workforce. So in that regard, when many of us are still trying to figure out our own leadership styles, what advice do you have for people who sort of want to take those first steps to sort of identity, being identified as a leader? But it takes some skill building. So what are some of the first steps in which they can do that?

Norman Wolfe (12:05)

Yeah, that's great. ⁓ Well, first steps, multiple first steps. Excuse me. I would start off by challenging yourself to think about what is it that I'm Because that starts the process. How you view what your role as a leader is and what you are leading changes the challenges you will identify.

Right? if you, and just in the terms of what we've been talking about, if you look at an organization as a machine, your role of leader is to optimize it. If you look at it as a living person, your role of leader is to nurture, develop, and grow it so it can be more capable on its own. If you just look at that one little piece, in the machine, I as the leader am responsible for the effectiveness of the machine.

as nurturing a living person, I as a leader am responsible to make this person capable to run it on its own. Very different starting points to begin with. ⁓ So then if you shift to that, so my advice obviously is look at the organization as a person. And once you begin to go down that path, then you have to decide what do you need to do to be effective in that?

And running it as a machine, you need skills of ⁓ logic, reason, structure, system design, ⁓ flow analysis, all the kind of logical process stuff that we're taught as leaders, knowing how to measure it, have a set goals, and so forth. When you're dealing with a human, those things are still important. mean, people do not grow unless they have goals to shoot for.

I mean, otherwise, and you want to establish the goals in a way that, as I said earlier, you want to there's a theory that comes out of gaming that has to do, it's called the band of challenge that learned it years ago when I was playing around with technology. I was always in technology. And the theory behind it is you want to keep the person you want to keep the person engaged in the game. If the game is too difficult.

They get frustrated and leave. Not what you want. The game is too easy. They get bored and they leave. Not what you want. So apply that to the development of a person. If the goals are too easy, they can already achieve it. They get bored and look for something else. We see that all the time. I've been doing this for years and years. I want some challenge. I got to move on. That's somebody leaving the game. If the

challenges to frustrating, they go, I can't ever achieve that. They don't believe in it. They get frustrated and they don't do anything. They disengage. They may not leave the game, but they don't play. They get by. So you want to create the goal setting with the human in relationship to their existing capability so that they have a number of successes and some failures so they can learn. They never fail. There's no learning.

And I don't view failure as a bad thing. That's a use of a language. We've got to change. anyway, ⁓ and so you want to keep that band of challenge in mind. So that's another thing you want to skill, you want to learn as a leader. You want to learn how to, went to coach and went to direct. That's part of that understanding. Because if you're always telling somebody what to do and how to do it, ⁓

They never learn. You're keeping your kids at a dependency level where at the age of 35 they're going to be in your basement. You don't want that to your organization. I work with a lot of leaders, obviously, and one of the themes I see all the time is wrapped up in the statement of, why can't they make decisions on their own? They're more expert at what they do than I am.

Corey Andrew Powell (16:02)

Yeah.

Norman Wolfe (16:29)

I say, how many times do you answer their questions when they come to you? They stop and they think, well, maybe more than I should.

Corey Andrew Powell (16:36)

Yeah.

Yeah, that's if I may interrupt there for a moment, that's an interesting one, because I just thought about even when people are asking someone to do a simple task, like I remember going to someone and I'd have something in my hand, you know, I can't get this. And they'll take it. That's right. And they'll just finish it. And I'm like, well, that didn't know, okay, it's done. The task is done. But I have no idea. And the next time I'm by myself, I have no idea how to do it. So I love that. That's a, that's a good lesson for the people who do that.

to others, they should stop doing that.

Norman Wolfe (17:11)

And it has to do with what's your role. It goes back to what we talked about. What is your role? If your role is to make sure things get done, then that's the most efficient way to do it. And your hope, they learn from you by watching. That's the game. The other trap that happens along those lines is ⁓ I get frustrated and I delegate to you and I let you do it on your own. That's also problematic because

If you don't, you're sort of like AI, I give you a challenge, you don't know what to do, you hallucinate. You make sure you don't mess up. Yeah, exactly. And then I get frustrated and I go, well, what's the matter? Couldn't you do it? See, I knew you couldn't do it all along. And then I take it back. And so it becomes this. So as a leader, one of the key skills to learn is how to coach, when to coach, when not to coach, how to create that band of challenge to develop the people.

Corey Andrew Powell (17:48)

Hey

Norman Wolfe (18:08)

I think another key skill of leader, and this is what we've created in terms of counterpoint to plan, lead, organize and control. We call it set the context, develop the people, build community and be of service. That's the new role of leadership from our perspective. And when I talk about setting the context, somebody has to be the voice, the expression of why this organization exists and what we're trying to accomplish.

If you're to get a group of people together to achieve something, they have to know what are they working towards together? What's the common driving purpose of why do we exist? ⁓ So we have a tool called the strategic compass. It's sort of like mission vision values, but it's really very different in the way it's created and the way it's used. ⁓ So the strategic compass consists of four things. One is why do we exist in the first place?

I mean, what's our purpose, right? If we achieved our purpose, what impact would we make? And that's sort of like the vision, but it's much more engaging. It's like, wow, if we really achieved this purpose we set out to do, this is the way the world would be different. We actually created it as a narrative as opposed to a statement, like a story or a picture or a song or a poem. I mean, it really carries the energy with it.

And then the question is, OK, this is the purpose we have. This is the impact we want to make. How are we going to go about doing it? Lots of people can have the same purpose, but the path to getting there, to achieving it, could be very different. ⁓ I can be a consultant. I can be a public speaker. I can still be focused on the same purpose. I just choose to do it in different ways. So the mission is what we call that. And then the fourth one is really important. If this is a living person, what's our character?

not just our values, but what's our character? Who are we going to be in the world while we're doing all these things? And so that's our strategic compass. And that helps set the context. gives the foundation, the guide rails of how we're going to behave and who we're going to be and what are we going to accomplish and what we're going to focus on. Yeah, with that in place, then I can start saying, OK, go try it. And as people attempt to to deliver results,

Corey Andrew Powell (20:28)

Yeah.

Norman Wolfe (20:39)

They're going to struggle. Well, that's the opportunity to grow up. That's why failure is really an integral part of development.

Corey Andrew Powell (20:49)

Yeah, love that you, was, it's funny because I was going to ask you if we could revisit that because you did touch on that in the beginning of your answer. Explain why that concept is sort of elusive, the idea of failure and why it's actually beneficial.

Norman Wolfe (21:06)

I wish I had my daughter who just gave birth recently to my next grandchild. Thank you. Show me a video of one of the older ones who's just starting to walk. And the video shows my grandson. ⁓

Corey Andrew Powell (21:14)

Congratulations on that.

Norman Wolfe (21:34)

sort of wobbling, standing up and then falling down. And then he's got this big smile on his face. That's the beauty of it, right? And then he gets up again, wobbles, falls down, smiles, he's laughing. He thinks this is the greatest game. In our society, you reach a certain age and you're not allowed to fall down anymore. And if you do, you're not supposed to smile.

If we as humans started at a very early age, we'd never get up and walk, right? We couldn't, right? There's a, we have put a value in our society on the concept of expertise.

And we strive to reach expertise. And once we're there, we figure we've got it. The problem is that expertise presumes you've learned everything there is to learn.

Now, think about it this way. I call it the learning paradox. I want to be successful. I want to be considered an expert. I want to be viewed as knowledgeable and capable. So I strive, I strive, I strive, I get to a certain point.

Now I've got to learn something new. Well, to learn something new means I don't know it. If I don't know it, I'm bound to make mistakes. If I make mistakes, I fail. If I fail, I'm not successful. So you see the paradox. And that's the way we've set it up, because we put so much power on learning, on being learned as opposed to learning.

There's a phrase that I've taken and modified. The traditional phrase, you either win or you lose. And I like to say, you either win or you learn. Yeah, that's great. Just a reframing of something to orient us to doing. Somebody asked me years ago, what made you so successful? And I thought about it, and I said, it's easy. I like being stupid.

And it has to do with this willingness to accept I don't know something. ⁓

Corey Andrew Powell (23:56)

That's, you know, that is excellent because in the leadership conversation, the strongest leaders, the most successful leaders who I've spoken to, you included are the ones who have shared that there's power in having the confidence to walk into a room and go, you know what? I'm not the smartest person here. ⁓ I'm not the one who has all the answers here, but the smart thing about me is I'm going to find that person. I'm going to seek out those who can help me accomplish these goals because they have.

knowledge I don't have that that's the difference, right?

Norman Wolfe (24:27)

Yeah. And the willingness to be wrong ⁓ is the beginning of learning. If you always have to be right, there's nothing you can learn. Talk to any leader who's working with a person who's always coming up with an answer to why something happened the way it did. And they'll tell you, the one thing I want to hear is, I don't know.

I don't know why that happened. Let's explore together. That opens up a whole different conversation. We call it defensiveness the other way, right? We call them the being too defensive. What we're really saying is they're not willing to open up to learning something. And we know that's a limitation to the organization's growth.

Corey Andrew Powell (25:12)

Yeah, absolutely. And we actually here at the NSLS, one of our big attributes that we promote would be the growth mindset. Yes. And for me, it's been just personally something that has helped me in my career because I kind of crave knowing things that I don't know already. So I think if you have a genuine curiosity, that's the first thing people should try to write because you just you're just making yourself better really by

Norman Wolfe (25:36)

Absolutely.

Corey Andrew Powell (25:40)

owning what you don't know and then trying to claim some new stuff that you don't know. That brings me to at Quantum Leaders, your organization, and you focus a lot on ⁓ tapping into the power of the human spirit, which I love because it's much more of a sort of a more passionate, you know, compassionate response to the professional environment. But but if you could break it down for us, what does that mean and how can people tap into more of their meaningful and impactful life?

Norman Wolfe (26:13)

I think it breaks down to all the things we've been talking about, ⁓ We are all, how do I want to say it? We're all creative beings. We have a spark of innovation, creativity. As humans, we want to make a contribution in some way to make an impact, to feel like our lives mean something. And we have the capacity within us to do that.

And what gets in our way more than anything else is our desire to maintain the conditions of our life that we have grown to feel safe and secure in. There's an old song that I used to play every day as a reminder to myself for a long period of time. And I don't even know the name of the song, but the phrase within the song that I kept repeating over and over again.

Boats are saved within a harbor. But is that what boats are made for? We're meant to go out and explore and experiment and try things and fail and get into things we don't know anything about with a curious mind so we become like you did, capable of designing a basement. I mean, that's the human spirit.

Yeah, people often talk about organizations as living systems. And I said, no, I go a step further and call them living beings because living systems are designed and operate by the genetic code. A ⁓ fish will never fly in the sky, and a bird will never swim deep in the ocean. But humans, humans decide we not only want to fly in the sky, we want to go to the moon. And now, want it.

Yeah. Only humans have that capacity to go beyond our genetic limitations. That's a beautiful thing about the human spirit. And I believe in that strongly. And I believe organizations have the ability to bring that out in people. Because we're there to accomplish something we've never done before. And that's where that human spirit comes out.

Corey Andrew Powell (28:31)

Thank you so much, Mr. Norman Wolfe, founder and CEO of Quantum Leaders, Inc. I must tell you, sir, that this has been, I will classify this conversation as one of the most beautiful conversations I've had on the show. And it's really insightful. And thank you so much for being here today.

Norman Wolfe (28:47)

thank you, Corey. It's a pleasure to be here and I hope your audience enjoys this as much as you did and I did. Thank you.