



Creating Mission-Driven Companies

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David Dietz likes to be where change is happening, and where he can make a difference. As a budding journalist in the early 2010's, he had the rare opportunity to be a witness to history in the making with the Arab Spring. When David embarked on a journey to the Middle East he was on the ground for critical moments as they were happening in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Syria, and Bahrain.

These six countries were desperately seeking relief from poverty, as well as freedom from the oppressive, corrupt regimes. Uprisings, antigovernment protests, and rebellions were spreading across the Arab world. David knew this assignment would require some grit, and would even mean facing some danger, in order to be on the ground where change was really happening.

Among the many stories David wrote, one touched him deeply, beyond the complicated geopolitics of the moment. He was assigned to write a "puff piece" on the Egyptian cotton industry, known as the finest, most luxurious cotton in the world. At first, it seemed like an unimportant story - a page-filler that on the surface seemed unlike the kind of political story he usually sought out. But as he began his research, he learned about the harmful industrial agricultural practices that were being used in the Egyptian cotton industry, and the devastating toll these practices were having on the health of the farmers. This discovery changed the trajectory of David's professional life almost immediately.

It's well known that the gas and oil industries are contributing to our current environmental crisis, but with cotton, there is no apparent evidence of pollution—no puffs of smoke coming from exhaust pipes that we can easily see or smell. And yet, "75 percent of the farmers I spoke with had cancer from the incredibly toxic pesticides being used," says David. "As I dug into the story more, I discovered that cotton was the second dirtiest industry in the world, right after oil and gas."

Cotton is a crop grown from the earth like any vegetable or fruit, and it has all of the dangerous pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, and other chemicals used in the agricultural production process. But it is not simply harvested and then sent to stores to be consumed, like tomatoes or carrots. Cotton also has a massive *manufacturing* footprint, processes during which dyes, solvents, and all other kinds of chemical treatments are used, which can make it particularly toxic. Some estimates state that the average T-shirt has more than 40 kinds of chemicals that the FDA considers harmful - and these chemicals have been found in alarming numbers in the breast-milk of new mothers around the world.

"When I saw the toll this process was taking on human lives, and on the environment; and that it was being ignored by everyone else in the region, I realized I didn't just want to report on this urgent story," says David. "I really wanted to *do* something about it. I wanted to make a change."

To understand the scale of the cotton industry and its environmental impact, in 2019, there were nearly 14 million acres of cotton fields planted in the U.S. alone. This yields roughly 800 pounds per acre, all of which has been chemically treated in the fields, and then will be treated again in the manufacturing process, as it is worked into textiles. In Egypt, in 2019, there were roughly 350,000 bales of cotton produced, each of which contains 480 pounds of cotton.

David's first article about the cotton industry caused quite a stir. And the more he wrote about it, the more entrepreneurs who had similar concerns about the cotton industry reached out to him. Mostly, they reached out to thank him for highlighting this issue. Frequently, they wanted to spread the word about businesses in the fashion industry that were using ethically and environmentally conscious practices.

For his next adventure, David decided to build a socially conscious company. So he returned home to the U.S. and started his first company, Modavanti, an online boutique for ethical fashion brands. "My Mom was happy I was coming home, since the Middle East was dangerous," David says. "However, when I told her I was planning to start a fashion company, she was pretty confused. I'd never been into fashion. And in the beginning, I really didn't know anything about fashion. In fact, I was known for my rumpled journalist look," he says with a laugh.

To David, it didn't matter *what* industry he worked in, or what people thought about his new venture. What mattered to him was that he could create a mission-driven company, one that would tell the story of entrepreneurs that are running businesses the right way.

After receiving a massive amount of support from ethical fashion companies around the world, he was invited to speak at the United Nations about the need for sustainable fashion. "Through this process, I really learned about the power of community," he says. "I learned that if you share your story, and you live with passion and conviction, people will come along for the ride with you."

For six years, David grew Modavanti; then he sold it because he wanted to expand his social entrepreneurship ventures. "I, and so many others, feel the need to push the boundaries and keep going," he says. "We must never get complacent with what we've accomplished. So many challenges lay ahead of us. With a strong community, we can impact change in a positive way for everyone." To explain his unique business ventures, David likes to quote a favorite television character, Sam Seaborn of *The West Wing*: "The history of man is hung on the timeline of exploration, and this is what is next."

At Modavanti, David had built partnerships with several brands that were addressing the issues of plastic waste, recycling, and upcycling plastic from beaches and waterways. He realized that with a little bit of entrepreneurial know-how, he could leverage this community for the next level of good. This is when David decided to join Nexus, where a vast network of like-minded, socially conscious entrepreneurs were on the forefront of enacting precisely this type of approach. David went on to lead the sustainable fashion segment at the Nexus Summit, where he was embraced by the community, offered support in a variety of ways, and was setup with mentorship opportunities from the veterans in the space. He was encouraged to continue tackling larger and more nuanced sustainability issues by this strong community he'd found, and he credits this support as having a great impact on his continued success.

As Director of Impact Initiatives at Nexus, David, with the increasing support of the community, decided to take on one of the most pressing sustainability issues of our time - plastic waste. So, in 2020 he launched his new venture, SUPR, with the purpose of making an impact on the reduction of single-use plastic products. To realize his ambitious goal, SUPR partnered with Accenture and Oceanic Global, to develop a master plan for how professional sports teams can transform their supply chains to become plastic-free.

All of David's ventures are done with a dual purpose: to introduce sustainability concepts to a wider, and younger, audience. Since so many people around the world are influenced by sports, David believes that if organizations like SUPR can get cultural leaders to get vocal about social responsibility, it can go a long way towards making a healthier, more sustainable world.

In 2020, the Miami Dolphins hosted the Superbowl for the first time in 10 years. David was thrilled that the Dolphins went 99.4 percent plastic free for the Big Game, implementing many of SUPR's plastic free solutions.

Since then five teams have made the pledge, and have committed to making changes in their supply chains and practices to reduce plastics. One team has even begun recycling Coke bottles and turning them into athletic wear for stadium employees.

David knows that we are reliant on the next generation to come up with the solutions to save the planet. For youth who want to get involved with such work, he says, “It’s not going to be easy. But nothing that’s worthwhile is: it’s important not be dissuaded by the challenges that lay ahead of us. They are both wide and far-reaching.” He wants young entrepreneurs to understand that creating a mission-driven business isn’t going to harm their chances of success. “In the near future, businesses with a social, environmental, or justice-related mission will be the ones leading the way,” he says. “Saving the planet and helping others will be part and parcel of successful businesses. And since we are at such a tipping point, I not only believe it’s economically the correct move –I believe it is our *obligation* to do so.”

David knows from where he speaks. He has truly “lived the change” he wanted to see, by dedicating his professional life to walking a noble, restorative path. Anyone—including his Mom, who is now a believer—should be proud to follow him down that path.

Do your little bit of good where you are;

it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Call to Action: Encourage your sports teams to take the SUPR's Plastic Free Pledge to reduce plastic pollution. Spread the word about SUPR <https://www.pledgesupr.com/pledge> .

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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