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This book is dedicated to everyone who contributed to making this	

Introduction

Rickshaws Journey

An organization on
the road to
abundance

You start a business without knowing much about the travel industry. You dive into the magical adventure of entrepreneurship. For years, you built up the energy to do this by studying it deeply and observing how it shouldn't be done.

So, the journey begins. You plan to make it a wonderful and meaningful experience for yourself and everyone who takes the plunge with you. You have hardly any baggage. You don't need it (yet), you want to move lightly. How much baggage can fit into a rickshaw anyway? The rickshaw gets off to a good start. Almost immediately, there are bumps in the road to be navigated, and you do so successfully. You even manage to talk your way through some significant roadblocks: those point-of-no-return moments.

Things start to speed up, and you are amazed at how fast that

rickshaw can go. However, you must always keep your eye on the route ahead and make sure your vehicle is prepared to take the sharp turns.

Gradually it gets heavier and heavier; the amount of baggage increases as you acquire the suitcases you need to take you further. These suitcases have all kinds of compartments and deeper layers and you have to be careful not to get bogged down in your system. Every once in a while, you throw a few pieces overboard. Suddenly, the rickshaw screeches and grinds to a halt. Mister C is in the middle of the road (with a suitcase of viruses). You have to get rid of all that weight. Later, you may make a fresh start, sporting your tricycle.

These are the notes of our journey with Rickshaw Travel. It was an overwhelming journey that took much of my attention. We walked a fine line between idealism and realism. The higher purpose of this journey was to guide people on their way to their true destination. An adventure that spanned twenty years and led to us becoming a network organization with a turnover of 100 million euros.

There were bumps and wrong turns along the way. Sometimes I lost my soul in the speed of the movement, then found it again after stopping by an old oak tree at a bend in the road.

I paid as much attention as possible on the journey and learned an amazing amount because I find it both a joy and a necessity to constantly reinvent myself. The notes I share in this book are a record of my and our key insights: our discoveries, failures, and successes. It is also the testimony to my development as a human being and as a leader on a quest to find the intersection between meaning and success, wanting to be kind and do good yet remain effective and successful.

I wasn't an entrepreneur, manager, strategist, or visionary when I started out and I needed to get up to speed if this adventure was going to lead anywhere.

For a company, just like for any individual, there are all sorts of dimensions to build on. I was amazed at how much there is to discover on all fronts. Every time the sun rises, there is another eyeopener. There are also more profound and deeper layers to tap

into if you are willing to give intuition space and are open to the unknown.

The work of Stephen Covey taught me that as an entrepreneur, you can “keep the blade sharp” by continuing to develop four coefficients. These are related your physical, social, and emotional life, as well as your mental choices and spirituality. I apply them to Rickshaw Travel.

The four coefficients

1. The mental dimension: What deliberate **choices** do you make?

What are the starting points, the values, and the main pitfalls and exits? These will be addressed in Part 1. How do you stay consistent yet agile? At Rickshaw, we opted for a positive view of humanity and chose abundance. However, we were still confronted with a lack of initiative at times. We decided on nonmarketing and non-branding and still became the market leader in our segment. How do you stay innovative when you’ve become a big, cuddly teddy bear?

2. The social dimension: How do you work **together** within the company? Part 2 explains what we at Rickshaw did to introduced and maintain engagement, fun, and flow. How do you handle this when you have international teams and a large workforce across different countries? The high level of employee involvement made us powerful, but was also overwhelming at times. What management style is required if you want to embrace people and continue to score? What does it do to an organization if you take staff to a palace in India for a long weekend?

3. The physical dimension: How do you **shape** the organization? What structures are suitable for each phase, and allow the company to sustain its performance while embracing the power of its employees? Part 3 goes into that in detail.

At Rickshaw, we evolved from being a start-up to implementing a cellular structure.

From there, we shifted to self-steering (that turned out to be a tough one) and then moved to a new location. The structures we chose stemmed from entrepreneurship and creativity but we sometimes got the opposite. So, what is the third way? We rejected rules and ignored formalities, but sometimes what is not set out is the most compelling.

4. The spiritual dimension: How can you raise **awareness** about a company?

What turn can you consciously take for love and abundance?

Where does a vision come from? And how do you know when it's the right one? How do you stay pure? What is the *purpose* of the organization? And what does that mean for everyone who works for you?

Part 4 explains how we did this at Rickshaw: we tried various methods to go deeper into the policy and motivation. Everything from meditation to systemic work; from visionary dreams to intelligent conversation and mental audits; from active listening to the *life-changing Rickshaw Quest*; from silence to manifestation. Many sources were opened up, and sometimes we had to pause for a moment to tune in more to reality.

Where are we going?

Is there a special place where the rickshaw will eventually end up? A place so filled with inspiration that people can carry with them? You might think that this may be too hard, just as I thought that the Taj Mahal in the early morning light wouldn't live up to my high expectations when I grumpily rode there in a rickshaw, of all things. However, there in the golden light of the first rays of the sun, the Taj was disarmingly beautiful in a miraculous way. It was built out of love for a woman, and I felt that in every fiber of my being.

Over the years, many people have left Rickshaw for other, often fulfilling, jobs. Still, almost without fail, they still have a special

place in their hearts for Rickshaw. I hear again and again how the organization touched them. What was it that touched them so?

After more than twenty years, I think I have found the answer. What touched them was more than all the quirky choices, unusual chances and spiritual paths we took, which are described in this book.

The heartfelt intention that resonated throughout the organization struck a chord with them. *Plain and simple*. This intention led the rickshaw to follow a unique path. However, it was at times a challenging, not always enjoyable, ride. Mistakes were made, and employees were shortchanged. Often, we had to take a long detour and ask ourselves where we were going. What was it that resonated so strongly?

It all led to abundance. And the road to abundance is paved with giving. Giving with love. No more no less; simply a magic wand that takes you to a place you won't easily forget.

That is what it takes for a journey to bring you closer to your destination.

In conclusion, let me sum up how this magic wand works. Travel isn't always fun, but it usually is. The fun part is the sense of wonder you feel with every discovery you make. The realization that you've never quite arrived and always need new lessons to bring you more success. It is a rewarding subject to write about.

Warmond, October 2022

The timeline in Figure 1 below shows the phases the company went through. Part 3 provides a detailed explanation of the different organizational models and the color representations, which are based on Ken Wilber's concepts.



Figure 1: Rickshaw Travel's timeline

Part 1:

The mental dimension:

What choices do we make?

1.1

Introduction

“Every insight is a moment of Freedom”

Deepak Chopra

Starting and developing a business requires a lot of thought and choices. An organization truly reaches its potential when it has a strong differentiating factor in the market for its employees and other stakeholders. How do you make sure it stands out? You do that by repeatedly making choices that are unique and original and that resonate with a relevant market segment. Albert Einstein said: “You cannot solve a problem with the same mind that created it.” The same applies to any issue you want to solve for a customer. If, based on a series of original choices, you have discovered a unique intersection that resonates with stakeholders, you can develop a consistent approach and continually improve upon it. This builds solid know-how in the organization that can be turned into an effective machine. Matching this with customer needs is a considerable challenge in itself. I will elaborate on this in 1.10.

The crucial question behind all these possibilities is: What steps can you take to discover those unique pathways that will boost your company with a fresh and distinctive starting point?

Stephen Covey’s ***“The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”*** (1989) outlines this beautifully: “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose.”

You don’t want to have a knee-jerk response to your surroundings and provide obvious answers. Because then you would do what everyone else is already doing.

So, where do you find that space? Stephen provides all kinds

of sources for it:

1. Imagination

If you have a vivid imagination, you can create a unique world that is not simply taken from your surroundings but seemingly plucked out of thin air.

I've always been a dreamer. In elementary school, I was often distracted in class, staring out the window and daydreaming about a different world. All my life, I loved having a lie in and staying in bed for a long time, musing about everything that may come to mind. Even in the shower, I never wanted to turn off the water, for fear of interrupting my dreams. But I saw this as laziness and an unproductive use of time. It's the same with travel. I loved being completely immersed in a new (dreamlike) world, far from the reality of everyday life.

When I was in my final year of business studies, my girlfriend came into a nice inheritance. I quickly came up with an idea of what we could do with it and for four months we went on a world trip. Meanwhile, my student loan continued to increase, and I felt self-indulgent and irresponsible. Retrospectively, this may have been the most fruitful period in my life, it was when my passion for long-distance travel took root. Without it, I may not have started Rickshaw. As I engaged more with the company, I began to appreciate the value of having free space for dreaming. I started using dream time deliberately to solve significant issues and develop new visions. I instructed my subconscious to deal with that issue on "the second screen" and look for space to make this work. That is how my most original ideas came about.

Ken Wilber teaches us that there are two ways to learn (and thus nurture your choices). You can learn by "description" and by "discovery". (See *The Integral Life* course (2019) on the *Mindvalley* platform). There are countless books to read; they give you a lot of knowledge and ideas.

During my twenty years with Rickshaw, I have read a lot. There are great works available to give you much insight; several are mentioned in this book. You will find a list of references at the end of the book.

But it is far more efficient if you get a sudden insight through a personal experience or if you pluck ideas out of thin air while daydreaming. The pinnacle of this is a moment of “enlightenment” that some people experience at some point in their lives. These are profoundly transformative experiences.

Once you know that this route is effective, the key is to cultivate it and create moments that attract these discoveries. They can also happen collectively; I will address that in Part 4. The attentive reader will notice this book brimming with unique ideas and unconventional turns. Are you beginning to guess how those came about?

2. Conscience

Every person has a conscience. I agree with what Rutger Bregman states (*Humankind*, 2020). I believe most people want to play a constructive role in life. Many people feel a strong calling, a life mission, however, not everyone has pinpointed that exactly for themselves. In Part 4, I talk about how Rickshaw tried to draw this out of its employees. For your conscience to play an important role, you need to address it regularly and wake it up. In everyday business, it's clear to see that many companies turn into ruthless moneymaking machines, and lose sight of other essential aspects. Their employees seem to lose touch with their core. To recalibrate that connection, it is often necessary to step outside the process and question whether what is happening aligns with your values and the original purpose for starting the company. If it is not, you have a sacred duty to hit the brakes. That is how you find the space between stimulus and response.

I started the company because I want to work and live in a different way. At school, I did not feel free and that was also true at my first job with a major American IT company. I could not come to terms with an employer who did not care for their employees. I wanted to do it all differently. My wish was that, in my company, it would be clear that I my intentions were good and that people were important for me. This is how I found my own space between stimulus and response. However, I also noticed that my intention was constantly under pressure. I had to repeatedly call myself to account and return to the “pure” path.

3. Self-awareness and free will

Whatever your environment, you have your passion and desires. We humans are the only species on earth who have the power to think freely and the ability to use that as a source for actions. Regardless of what the others do.

I started Rickshaw with little knowledge of the travel industry. I wanted to use what for me had been great experiences and did not research existing concepts and practices in the industry. In retrospect, this was (luckily) an advantage, as Rickshaw immediately claimed a unique position in the market, and our market approach seemed to come from a different planet. Before long, I found out how complex the industry was, with its flight infrastructure, travel conditions, SGR (Travel Guarantee Fund Foundation), ANVR (the Dutch Association of Travel Agents and Tour Operators), liability for calamities, etc.

Fortunately, within two years, I brought in a partner who had this expertise.

More recently, I've come to recognize that there are many other ways to free yourself: your choices depend on the level of consciousness at which you operate and the paradigms in which you get stuck. The more you develop yourself, the more opportunities you will have. In his book ***Reinventing Organizations*** (2014), Frederic Laloux outlines how companies have undergone an ever-increasing development from "basic action-oriented organizations" to "bureaucratic organizations" to "performancebased organizations" to "social organizations" and ultimately to "empowered organizations" with high goals and employees who are able to be themselves across the board: more on this in Part 3.

The point is that if you are in a specific environment (for example, a socially minded organization), this determines your capabilities considerably. Then it is not easy to give employees entrepreneurial and empowered roles if these challenge the social ethos. Rickshaw slammed into this head-on (see Part 3).

If you look closely, there are multiple paradigms. Ken Wilber has extensively mapped out various paradigms as much as possible (the AQAL map, as mentioned in Part 4). By placing yourself or the organization on this map, you become more aware of your position and its limitations. You can also see how far you are from the starting point, what you have left behind, and what the next level would be. That is where the great liberation from oppressive principles can begin.

And if we are free enough, we can choose.

To conclude

To choose freely, you can look for the space between stimulus and response. You can use **imagination** for this, which you can stimulate by going into dream mode. You can also engage your conscience, which you need to recalibrate regularly. Finally, there is also **self-awareness** and free will, nourished by your passion. By being aware of the paradigms in which you find yourself, you are better able to see the context and try to transcend its limitations.

1.2 Choosing the right concept

The most crucial choice you need to make as an entrepreneur is at the start of your business. What kind of business should it be and why? What kind of concept are you launching? I believe that most entrepreneurs start with an idea that excites them. You're looking to introduce a new and groundbreaking concept that can make a significant difference.

For me, it was about the kind of travel I wanted to provide. I started backpacking in distant countries when I was just twenty-two. What I remember most about these trips was feeling that I was part of people's lives. Their lives were so different from mine, I came home energized by all the impressions and mirrors that each journey presented me with. Ten years later, when I was ready to start my own business, I was eager to give this essential experience to travelers. There were plenty of providers of individual trips in the Dutch travel market, but few offered the small-scale and authenticity that I had in mind. That would be my unique selling point in that market and it was totally "me". By introducing travel modules (building blocks) on the Internet, I ensured the customer could combine small-scale travel with a system that provided them with the most freedom and

the most efficient purchasing. I thought this solution was the holy grail.

Building blocks already existed (the former NBBS had invented them) but were not yet used to build entire tours.

Staying passionate about your concept

So, you believe you have a unique concept and are extremely enthusiastic about it. But for you to maintain that enthusiasm, preferably long-term, it must be deeply rooted. So deep that you do not lose it, even after years of being in business. There are countless examples of initially successful concepts that were passionately embraced, yet later lost their real meaning in the hands of profitdriven shareholders. Take Airbnb: it started as a great idea for enabling travelers to sleep on an inflatable mattress and share available space in someone's home. However, it eventually deteriorated into a concept focused on maximizing the number of rooms pushed to as many tourists as possible, with no thought to the effect that would have on the original residents of streets and neighborhoods. Then there's Uber: initially its passion was similar, only in this case for car-sharing. Eventually, it transformed into a dominant force focused on maximizing the number of taxi rides at the lowest possible cost. Passion eroded. Why is that?

Firstly, the founder's enthusiasm may not have been deep enough.

Secondly, the business may have been taken out of the founder's hands and placed with people who had no regard for the founder's motives and are purely commercially driven.

So as a founder, you can do two things:

1. Delve into your passion so that it remains enduring.
2. Don't give too much control of your company to new shareholders.

Note 1: My drive for setting up Rickshaw with this concept was deep. That was because of the pain I felt at school and at the American company where I worked for seven and a half years. The pain of not being allowed to do what I wanted. The distress I felt when I spent entire days in environments where I did not feel at home and did not want to participate.
Pain is a very important motivator, perhaps the most important.

That's what reading Willem Glaudemans' book: ***Boek van de levensmissie*** [Book of the Life Mission] (2014) taught me. The bottom line was that I wanted to choose a concept that was all mine and that I could fully support. I also believed it was crucial to create an environment where I was at the helm and could set the conditions myself.
I wanted to choose freedom.
This was a driver I wasn't going to let fade away anytime soon.

The "Why" is the core

Such a fundamental motivation also involves something else. I have had the opportunity to mentor numerous travel start-ups, and a common issue is their attachment to their own concept. Just because you think you've got something great, does not automatically mean that consumers need it. Before you have a well-functioning concept, nine times out of ten you'll need to refine it and even completely overhaul it many times before it is embraced in the marketplace. It is essential to realize that a deeper motive directs the development of a concept. You must never give up on *why* you're doing it, but you may want to give up on *how* you're doing it.

If I could just find a travel concept that could truly capture the essence of my passion for travel in my own way while holding onto my freedom, then my faith and drive would remain strong. I opted for a specialized program per destination and with building blocks on the Internet, but I could have taken another direction. In retrospect, I was just lucky that the concept I chose matched the customer's needs. That is a good exception that proves the rule.

The "Why" is the core. With his *Start with Why* (2011), Simon Sinek unleashed a mini revolution. Why are you getting out of bed for this, and why would anyone care? For someone struggling to get out of bed, like me, that's a pivotal question. A company's "Why" remains consistent throughout its lifecycle, while its "How" and "What" often go through significant iterations.

Note 2. Don't give too much control of your company away to new shareholders. At the start, I quickly realized that I could not do this alone. I started an Internet business, but I didn't have the skills to create a website. So, I asked someone to help me with this. When the site had been live for about seven months, the sales and other practical matters became too much work for one person, so I asked a friend to take them over so that I could focus on further development. Another year later, a real travel professional came on board and brought in the necessary expertise. I didn't have enough money to pay them a salary that matched what they brought so I chose to give them shares. However, I kept the majority myself. Partners of Rickshaw have never had more than forty percent of shares in total: their claim was significant but not leading. From the beginning, I made a promise to myself never to sell the majority of the company to other businesses or to take it public. If I did, it could mean the death of what I wanted to bring into this world. It was clear that this was going to affect the speed of development. If I did everything myself, it would be slow, and I would lack expertise.

Handing over majority control could enable rapid growth, but there was a risk of compromising Rickshaw's uniqueness. I found the balance somewhere in the middle. And it worked: the company grew fast enough yet remained unique and independent. There are plenty of examples in the travel industry where other choices were made. You often come across solopreneurs or small teams who choose to retain ownership and struggle to surpass a turnover of between 1 and 5 million. You also see high-growth start-ups fighting their way into the market with a lot of capital. The founders find themselves playing second fiddle. When things are going well, lots of money is made, but does it still resonate with the founder's purpose and the unique contribution they want to make?

There is no such thing as the truth, but there is a lot of wisdom in the right measure.

To conclude

Work from a clear passion, tap into it thoroughly and make sure others cannot extinguish it. That makes it easier for you to get out of bed.

1.3 Choosing the right business model

All well and good, we have a deeply felt passion and a concept and are poised to conquer the market, but is the concept also capable of generating revenue? Even if you are not overly focused on money, a company only has the right to exist if it generates sufficient resources.

I was earning over 100K when I resigned from my American employer. It was my passion that motivated me to start my business and I was definitely willing to earn much less. Still, I wanted it to be sustainable so that I could enjoy it for the long haul.

When is there a compelling revenue model? For the answer, Jim Collins is the go-to expert (and is streets ahead of his colleagues). In his book ***Good to Great*** (2011) he describes what distinguishes great companies from “just good” ones.

The Hedgehog Principle

Every company needs a hedgehog. It appears to be an especially consistent creature with simple, clear habits, and is continuously evolving. This is where the Hedgehog Principle comes into play: a clear concept that can be described concisely and endures for the long term, able to withstand all the company’s turbulent challenges. With this concept, you can also easily explain how money is earned. Here are the revenues, there are the costs, and that is what's in between.

Rickshaw's Hedgehog principle is specialized sites per destination country, with small-scale cultural trips based on building blocks. That doesn't mean we only do building blocks or can never combine destinations, but it is at the core of how we earn our money. The Rickshaw earnings model also includes other specific choices, such as high costs for intensive service, almost no advertising, no brochures, a lot of attention for/costs spent on product development and procurement of trips, and extensive investment in the quality of staff work. We earn a net margin of between 4 and 10 percent by adding sufficient value in product and service, which means a relatively high gross margin can be calculated on the country-packages.

Therefore, the time-consuming request-to-book process must be completed effectively, i.e. with high conversion rates.

The Rickshaw revenue model is constantly under pressure; it requires continuous focus to keep making healthy profits. Where a ten percent profit in the build-up phase was once quite feasible in the Netherlands and Germany, later we had to fight for about 4 or 5 percent. The core of the revenue model has always remained intact; the hedgehog has continued to make its regular rounds. However, the grip on the revenue model has been further developed through better reporting and professionalization. For example, we started to calculate the revenue models for each destination, particularly by mapping the balance between deployment and conversion for each destination. Basically, we have been dealing with the same force field from the beginning.

Strengthening the business model

It is essential to take a broader perspective beyond just the Hedgehog principle to enhance the business model. One effective tool for this is the Business Model Canvas, as described in the book ***Business Model Generation*** (2013) by Osterwalder. By using the canvas, you can identify the nine key perspectives of a company. Subsequently, you can discover multiple focal points hidden beneath these nine sections.

The company's know-how is constantly being developed by systematically working on all these disciplines in a well-balanced way (see the 80/20 rule in 1.9). Still, everything is in line with the Hedgehog principle.

Jim Collins points out that great companies have a strong passion, a core know-how, and a clear and consistent revenue model. At that intersection, unique for each company, lies your ***Unfair Advantage***. It is “unfair” because no one else has this advantage in this way.

So, we have come pretty far already. There is just one more element missing: meaning for society.