

# Finding your purpose and leading like a fearless monkey

**Get in touch with who you are, as a person and as a leader, and live life like a fearless monkey.**



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*“What is perseverance in a king is seen as stubbornness in a monkey.”*

This Dutch adage provides important guidance for leaders seeking to innovate, says author

Dennis Heijn. Pathbreakers like Richard Branson or Steve Jobs often seem obstinate, he says. “You should dare because you want to be a king, but also accept the risk of being seen as a monkey.”

The former Heineken executive uses the metaphor of a monkey to describe how executives should first reflect and then leap courageously to their next goal, in his book, [\*The Fearless Monkey: A Creative Guide to Leadership in a Paradoxical World\*](#).

“I live what I write about,” says Heijn, “so I am often a monkey and sometimes a king.”

The book is a culmination of Heijn’s life experiences, but it’s not your typical autobiography; rather, it’s a collection of observations, together with life lessons handed down generation after generation in his family — owners of the well-known Dutch supermarket chain, Ahold, which is based on the name of his ancestor, Albert Heijn.

Part of the book focuses on sound management principles, rounded out with axioms from his grandfather like “take time to think and talk” and “the secret of a good life is a good understanding of each other.”

“Doing business is an integral part of the world around us,” says Heijn. “If we improve the way we do business by improving how we engage and treat our employees, clients, suppliers and other stakeholders, then it will have a significant impact on society.”

But Heijn wants readers to use his book not so much as a management manual as a vehicle for self-discovery: “Make it your own; read it, think, underline pieces you like, write in the margins, cross out what you don’t like, complete the exercises that attract you, ignore the ones that don’t. When you have read it in this way, you will already be starting to look differently, and then it is the challenge to dare to act differently. This is making the step, trial and error, daring to be a monkey and daring to be a king.”

He invites readers to reflect deeply on past formative experiences, getting in touch with who they are as a person and as a leader, their values and priorities, in order to check where they are on their own journey: “Am I just following or am I thinking for myself? I have followed often, only to realize I am not going in the right direction and need to start thinking for myself again.”

In this sense, Heijn’s story is similar to IESE’s educational philosophy: a reminder that the important things in life aren’t always taught through the transmission of knowledge in a classroom; something else is needed — experience, reflection, listening to others — to make

people really learn and grow.

## Making sense of the senseless, without blame

Thirty years ago, a year after Heijn finished his MBA at IESE and was launching out in the world, tragedy struck his family when his father was kidnapped and killed, an event he describes in his book.

In reflecting on what occurred, Heijn says that people should reject the notion that negative events happen to teach us lessons. Some people may claim, for example, that a car accident was a timely warning that they shouldn't speed. "I don't like this kind of thinking," he says. "It's one thing to draw meaning from something that happens to you. It's quite another to claim that it happened in order to teach you that lesson."

The distinction is important: one focuses on external forces, while the other emphasizes personal responsibility. Heijn explains it this way: "Imagine you're holding a pen in your fist. When you open your hand, the pen falls to the ground. Why? Obviously because of gravity. That's the answer I initially gave, and most other people give."

But he goes further: "The other reason is that, for the pen to fall, you had to have opened your hand. This might sound trivial, but it's quite crucial. To try to resist gravity is pointless and a waste of energy. So if you don't want the pen to fall, holding on to it is the right strategy."

No matter what challenges or setbacks come into your life, it is pointless to blame others. Instead, Heijn believes it is far more constructive to focus on what you can change to help make the situation better and move ahead.

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In 2024, Dennis Heijn published his first fictional novel, [Against the Flow](#), a thriller that mixes his own experience of his father's kidnapping to grapple with the age-old moral dilemma: does the end justify the means?

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# Be your authentic self

As a young manager, Heijn says he sometimes resisted adopting new behaviors because he didn't want to seem "fake." But he soon realized there was a big difference between "fake" and "unnatural." He gradually learned he had to practice the unnatural behaviors he wanted to master until they became habits; the artificial starts to feel more authentic over time. "For me, this was an important insight," he recalls.

Managing the tension between adapting to others while remaining true to yourself is a critical aspect of leadership.

An added challenge for global managers is that they are expected to adapt to local cultures — something Heijn experienced when living and working in Argentina, Israel, Hong Kong and Italy.

"When I was in Hong Kong, they thought I was a bit of an oddball, but in the end they saw that I had the best intentions and that I was executing the role I had been given with sincerity. The balance between adapting and being yourself requires constant reflection."

Heijn warns managers to be aware of extreme differences in behaviors across roles. If you are a doting parent at home but engage in unethical behavior at work, then "something is going wrong."

In the book, Heijn poses the rhetorical question, "When does adapting yourself cross over into no longer being authentic? And when does being authentic cross over into being a jerk?"

Heijn believes the concept of authenticity is being abused in advertising today. "What is authentic? What is the real you? Is it the person you are now or who you were 10 years ago? You are always just a person trying to make sense of life. There is no one single moment when we are more authentic than another, so a lot of what we consider 'authentic' is arbitrary."

Relating this to business, he says: "I believe that business can play an important role in improving the world — it's not a separate activity. If we are forced to do things that are against our nature, then things can start to divide. You have to look at the whole human being."

# Open your mind: what are you holding on to?

As his career advanced, Heijn learned the importance of staying open and curious.

“Inquisitiveness lets you see that certain unconscious assumptions you’ve made simply may not be right.”

He employs the monkey motif for another lesson: In Indonesia, monkeys are caught by placing a small portion of rice inside a coconut shell that’s attached to a chain. There’s a small hole in the shell, just big enough for the monkey’s hand to pass through. The monkey puts its hand in the shell and grabs the rice, but cannot get its hand out so long as it keeps its fist closed. It never thinks of opening its hand, which would allow it to escape.

“The monkey is not able to see at that moment the rice has no value, that it is of far less importance than freedom,” says Heijn.

“How many things are we clutching in our fists, not prepared to let go of them in exchange for our freedom?”

“By being inquisitive, by being open to the fact that the world may be put together differently than we think, we don’t chain ourselves to a coconut. We maintain the possibility to learn from experiences and grow.”

## Identify hidden goals and align them with others’

Later in his career, Heijn was involved with a number of startups. He describes a typical scenario: A startup needs help, so it gratefully accepts the offer of a large company; however, the large company appoints its own project managers and begins tightening control, until it ends up strangling the innovation and flexibility that attracted it to the small, nimble startup in the first place.

This is a sign that the **capabilities**, **conditions** and **hidden goals** of the two companies were not well aligned. Heijn refers to the **Triangle Model of Andreas Eppink**, who argued that the success of a certain person or organization centers on the interaction of those three factors.

**Capabilities** and **conditions** can support or hinder each other. For instance, if you have to

perform a particular job, you will need specific capabilities for this. If you lack the capabilities, you may be able to find them in the conditions of the job, which include your team. So, if your role requires you to do bookkeeping and that's not your strong point, you may be able to resolve the issue by asking someone on your team to help. Use the strengths people have, and resolve their weaknesses through other conditions, says Heijn. If you cannot compensate for capabilities through conditions, you'll face obstacles.

The third side of the triangle — **hidden goals** — can have a major impact on individual as well as organizational performance. Becoming aware of your hidden goals will enable you to choose, prioritize or create the conditions in which your goals can be satisfied. The greater alignment between the hidden goals of people and the organization, the greater the chance of success for “the individual career, personal well-being, collaboration (who works best with whom), the organization, management and company development, and ultimately the sustainability of it all,” Heijn writes.

### **Eppink's hidden goals: what are yours?**

*Individual and corporate goals need to be aligned, otherwise there will be conflict. Identifying hidden goals and seeking their alignment is vital for long-term success.*

- Stability, certainty, security, structure
- Ambition, expansion, power
- Creativity, ideas, inventiveness, design
- Independence, liberty, freedom, mobility
- Content, information, knowledge
- Social contact, communication, meeting people, exchange of services
- Humanity, helpfulness, doing good
- Ego and instant gratification, consumption, convenience
- Search for appreciation or approval, prestige, fame
- Tendency for immunity, privilege, inviolability, protection

## **Discover your purpose**

After years of globe-trotting, Heijn concludes that finding one's professional path is among the most challenging aspects of self-management.

“We all know people who wanted to be a pilot or a doctor and became one, but they're the lucky ones. For the rest of us, it's not that apparent,” says Heijn.

The maxim “follow your passion” is not always sound advice, since not every passion can be transformed into a lucrative career, and passion alone is no guarantee of success.

“Many people say if you do what you’re really passionate about, you can achieve anything you want,” he says. “I disagree. If you do something that you really care about and you don’t succeed, it may not be for lack of trying. There may be other reasons — you might be unlucky or the situation changes so that your goal is no longer possible.”

However, if your intuition signals that you are on the right path, don’t be dissuaded by obstacles, he adds.

To provide a framework for understanding the juxtaposition of personal and organizational purpose, Heijn points to Richard Barrett’s book, [Liberating the Corporate Soul](#).

Barrett identifies seven levels of organizational consciousness: survival, relationships, self-esteem, transformation, internal cohesion, making a difference and service. By defining core values for each level, Barrett offers a tool for deciding what’s important in both personal and organizational domains.

This can help answer questions such as:

- Where am I as a person?
- Where is the organization headed?
- Am I a good match for the company?

If your personal values veer from those of the company, this may be an indication that you are not in the right environment and may need to move on, Heijn says.

In his own book, Heijn highlights [Dr. Kees Waaldijk](#) as an example of someone who has finally found his higher purpose.

Waaldijk works in Nigeria treating women with vesicovaginal fistulas caused by childbirth. In addition to physical pain and discomfort, the debilitating condition condemns women to lives as social outcasts.

After reading about Waaldijk’s work in *The New York Times*, Heijn contacted the doctor and spent a week accompanying him to hospitals around northern Nigeria. “It was an unbelievable week during which Kees and the women made a big impression on me,” says Heijn.

Waldijk has carried out more than 22,500 carefully documented operations over 30 years. His wife and children live in the Netherlands, while he spends one month at home and three in Africa. Despite daily struggles, Waldijk is happy because he feels that every previous experience he had in life prepared him for this work.

In this sense, Heijn says, he is “connecting the dots,” a concept Steve Jobs discussed in his well-known Stanford University commencement speech of 2005.

“This is someone whose whole life has come together,” Heijn says. “It doesn’t happen to too many people, but as long as you’re consciously trying to get there, you’re headed in the right direction. And if you find out you’ve wasted two years of your life doing something you don’t like, learn from that and do something else.”

Importantly, Waldijk only concerns himself with things he can influence: “When he says to a woman that he can operate on her in a hospital that is 300km down the road, then he promises to operate on her if she shows up. He does not concern himself with how and whether she gets there. Neither does he concern himself with what a woman does the moment she walks out of the hospital,” Heijn writes.

By keeping a razor-sharp focus on what he can do, he maximizes the impact of his work.

Heijn also summons the familiar tale of the boy on the beach throwing starfish into the sea. When asked why he is doing something so futile, because there are so many starfish one boy can’t possibly save them all, the boy replies, while throwing another starfish into the water, “Well, it certainly makes a difference to this one.”

Echoing a recurring theme in his life, Heijn stresses: “Understand clearly what you can and can’t change, what you should focus on, and approach it fearlessly. From the moment you know what drives you and what you find important, you can shape your life accordingly.”

## **Note down important observations, like these, and ponder them**

- The paradox: large groups need rules and procedures to function, but those who break the rules at the right moment are the ones who will make the difference.
- You cannot solve or improve anything together if you don’t realize you have a problem in the first place. Nothing is more dangerous than being too self-confident and thinking you know it all.

- We are so eager to create a coherent story from the few facts we have that we reduce our complex world into manageable chunks we can then greedily devour.
- If you only take on people who follow the rules and you leave no room for creative breakthroughs, your organization will certainly not make a difference and will have less fun.
- Life is not a straight line: everybody knows that. So why do we always fall for beautiful plans with straight lines that point upwards?

*Dennis Heijn spoke at an IESE Alumni event in Amsterdam, organized by the Netherlands IESE Alumni Chapter, about his book, [The Fearless Monkey: A Creative Guide to Leadership in a Paradoxical World](#) (De Zandkorrel, 2017). The book was originally published in Dutch under the title *Je kan bomen alleen ontwijken als je vaart hebt*.*

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