

John Wood

Founder, Former CEO, and Board Co-Chair of Room to Read

Leadership Lessons from the Front Lines of Social Change. In this presentation, John highlights the leadership lessons that can be learned from the front lines of social change. He contends that leaders must be continually disruptive – finding better ways to do business and challenging not only their organizations but themselves in a quest for continual improvement. His brand of leadership balances an uncompromising commitment to the bottom line with deep organizational humility – a willingness to acknowledge problems and consider solutions no matter the source. John Wood inspires audiences to think differently and more boldly about what they can accomplish as leaders. He insists that audacious goals attract audacious people, and that when they work together in an organization that inspires and recognizes innovation, there are no problems they can't solve. Leadership is a subject on which John lectures at leading business schools, including University of Chicago, Harvard, Kellogg, Wharton and Stanford, and this is an increasingly popular topic amongst corporations, universities, and membership organizations.

Setting Great Expectations (And Finding Great People to Meet Them). In studying and working under great leaders, John Wood has come to believe that bold goals attract those with courage and self-confidence. The corollary is also true. When he started Room to Read and set the BHAG (Big, Hairy Audacious Goal) of reaching 10 million children by 2020, people thought he was crazy. But that bold goal attracted more 10,000 people to get involved, and he will now reach his BHAG in 2015, five years early. Room to Read's core business is empowerment, a concept that applies as much to its staff and volunteers as to the millions of kids now pulling themselves out of poverty with freshly opened textbooks and minds. John explains how sharing ownership – over programs, outcomes, and ideas – has helped rally thousands of exceptional people to Room to Read's banner. "I have never wanted to be the leader of an organization. I want to instead be one of many, many leaders of a global movement."

The War For Talent. "If you are highly educated," John says, "and you have both a global network and a track record of success, there are more opportunities available to you in this globalized world than ever before. That puts the onus on the employer to attract, motivate, and retain those talented people." John shares the "five simple things" he does every week to help Room to Read win the war for talent – even though, as a non-profit, it can't compete on salary, benefits, or other perks. Any organization whose leaders implement these five low-cost methods will yield immediate – and massive – ROI.

Doing More With Less. John talks with the audience about his own parents' adage that "It's a blessing to be born poor, because that makes you scrappy and entrepreneurial." John applied that wisdom to boot-strapping Room to Read from the earliest days, with zero budget and zero fundraising experience. Whether he was borrowing office space, begging for frequent flier miles, or convincing global firms to donate free cement (Lafarge) and millions of children's books (Scholastic), John lived the example he wanted every employee to internalize: "We can always do more with less." Few other global change movements reached nearly 8 million children in their first 13 years. "It's all the more special," John says, "that we did this not as a well-funded foundation or a U.N agency but as a scrappy little start-up that originally didn't have two nickels to rub together."

Leaving Microsoft to Change the World. John's first-person account of following his passion, and the lessons learned in doing so. He discusses what's possible when a committed person dares to take risks and leave his or her comfort zone. It is a popular "inspiring close" or "bring people to their feet" dinner speech at corporate, industry, and education conferences.

Absolute Accountability. Most NGO's hide their annual figures, or publish them grudgingly. Room to Read posts all financial statements to its website – not just for one year, but for the last six. It makes all external evaluator reports public as well, "warts and all." As a result, Room to Read has earned top marks for transparency from Charity Navigator, and donors have come to appreciate – and reward – its radical approach to openness. John himself has written two best-selling books in which he's not afraid to discuss "all the things I've screwed up." Admitting his mistakes, he says, "gives others the freedom to take risks, knowing that our response when things don't go as planned will be to laugh, forgive, learn a few lessons, and then get back onto the playing field to take another shot."

Reaching Out To The World. Starting with very little social media knowledge, John has amassed 370,000 Twitter followers in just two years, building one of the charity world's most popular profiles along the way. Today, he and his team coordinate a worldwide network of employees and volunteers, requiring a vast comprehensive communications effort that spans literacy levels, time zones, and technological gaps to get the job done and the message across.

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