Leadership (Part 2) Transcript

Episode 6 – Startup Survival Podcast

By Peter Harrington

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Speaker 1 (00:04):

Hello and welcome to your Startup Survival Podcast. My name's Peter Harrington. And in this episode, I'll be sharing part two of John Lo's inspirational leadership story. If you tuned into part one, you'll know John's recent background with Dare to Care and how in less than three months and working all over London and beyond, he stepped up and ultimately arranged for over 18,000 PPE items to be sent to the NHS and secondary line services; for over 1000 care packs and 20,000 meals to be provided to isolated and compromised individuals; and for more than 250 people to be recruited and mobilized. So how was all the work done and over 40,000 pounds fundraised, to pay for the whole initiative? John often worked 16 hours a day, and remarkably John chose not to pay himself a penny.

Speaker 1 (01:05):

In this second part of the episode, we move on from learning what Delta care achieved and asked John to reflect on the highs and lows of the journey. We'll also be hearing about what really inspired John and what he learned. Finally, I'll be asking John to share advice and leadership insights, but before we go there, I must once again, acknowledge the energetic startup survival podcast community and recognize the kind and generous who through uplifting support and feedback are fueling this adventure. So big. Thanks. Go to teaser. Marcelina Steven Barpalias Tatiana Ellen, Danielle Phillips LaMean Jean-Claude Juncker Christopher Shannon, Jay Patel, Helen Hopper, Emma Chilvers, Maria Grogan, Sophie Newhut, and Alison Gee. These may be challenging times, but like the first half of this two part episode, I really hope what you about to hear resonates with and builds your spirit. So let's get going. My name's Peter Harrington, and this is your inspirational leadership startup survival podcast. John, I want to pick up where we left off at the end of part one, you recommended the book tools of Titans by Tim Ferriss, and you majored on the issue of leverage. Can you explain why leaders like yourself take leverage so seriously?

Speaker 2 (02:39):

So leverage is about maximizing the impact you generate using the least amount of effort. There were tons of voluntary organizations producing PPE, like laser cutting visors, 3D printing masks, and we didn't need to become another one. What we did was we linked these various procurement initiatives together, and we provided the delivery service to the places where PPU is needed most urgently because we had the data to make those prioritization calls. So they were organizations who were producing PPE, but didn't know where to send them. So we send them to places that way they were needed. There were organizations producing PPE who didn't know which needs were the greatest. So we help them prioritize. And the total amount of PPE that we sent was greater than what these organizations we partnered with sent individually. And there was also more impact in

terms of where we sent the PPE because we prioritized COVID hot hubs. We probably weren't as high as places where PPE was going to run over the next day. And we weren't just sending PPE to the first people who requested it.

Speaker 1 (03:49):

So, John, why was your operation so successful compared to others?

Speaker 2 (03:55):

Keep in mind that our impact was very scalable. Once the data collection process was set up, it didn't take any extra effort to collect an extra response or two, and we could push the form out to more people very easily. And this is in contrast with the PPE manufacturers we were working with, who had to be producing every single day and we're investing all the money they got from crowdsourcing into the producing of PPE. So not only do we make more impact than they did individually, but we did it with a fraction of a cost and a fraction of the effort. Now this is obviously not to say that we are more important than them because without the PPE that you produced, we would have nothing to send. And likewise, without our data, the PPE that they sent would have gone off to less impactful areas. So it's a mutually beneficial partnership.

Speaker 1 (04:49):

So what's the learning in all of this. John,

Speaker 2 (04:53):

I would challenge you to think deeper about how work has a natural value hierarchy and not all types of work will generate the same amount of impact with the same amount of effort. And that if you're thinking about where to position, what you want to do, it's usually scarcity. That is the key determinant of how valuable your work will be.

Speaker 1 (05:15):

So how did you leverage that scarcity?

Speaker 2 (05:19):

Because there was a lot of PPE procurement organizations, but only one organization that collected data and ranked it in terms of priorities like us, what we were doing had much more impact for the same amount of effort spent. So we were working with three PPE procurement manufacturers, and I did some calculations and for them to produce and send one visor on average, it cost us a little over 10% of their cost. So we can send 10 times as many visors as they could with the same amount of money. So these differences in terms of the impact to effort ratio can be very substantial. And that's not even to mention the multiplicative effects with natural press coverage and things like that, because it's not a good headline story to say you've sent a few thousand visors, but it is a good headline story to say you've sent like, I don't know, like 15,000.

Speaker 1 (06:14):

So John what's the key takeaway from all of this?

Speaker 2 (06:19):

The key here really is to create a situation where you allow these external factors to all be working in your favour. And that's the key to achieving exponential returns. If your impact to effort ratio is naturally quite high to begin with, you attract much more volunteers, you attract more supporters, you attract more coverage and publicity and all of these things snowball and make that impact to effort ratio even higher, and then even higher.

Speaker 1 (06:51):

By now the power of John's thinking and how he had applied his intellect to Dare to Care was shining through. But I also felt like the onlooker who only sees the success and achievement and as a result is taken in by the Rose-tinted spectacle keen to change the angle of questioning. I put it to John that running Dare to Care must have had real challenges.

Speaker 2 (07:14):

Yeah. So that's a very good question. The biggest low point was definitely the amount of work I had to put in every day. There was some days when I was spending 16 hours a day especially during a start of setting up Dare to Care packages for weeks on end, just working on this, I would get up, you know, like shower and then immediately sit in front of my computer and start building the site, setting up the databases, emailing back and forth and automating a lot of things. And obviously this got draining after a while, the silver lining with lockdown in London was there was literally nothing else I could do. So it wasn't like I was going to go outside, but still having to exert so much mental energy every day got quite frustrating. And there were some times where I began to lose my motivation for doing this, which is why I think it's important to always know how to discipline yourself when you aren't motivated. There's this quote. I really like I read somewhere, which is you will never always be motivated. So you need to learn how to be disciplined.

Speaker 1 (08:14):

So what does being disciplined mean to you? John

Speaker 2 (08:18):

Discipline, to me means knowing your personality well enough, that you can create conditions where you can do something, even if you aren't intrinsically motivated to do that thing. And this works very differently for different people. Some people like the idea of row reward. So if they finish a task, they'll reward themselves with like, I don't know, a cake or something else they like, or they can watch 30 minutes of Netflix.

Speaker 1 (08:50):

Timeboxing what do you mean by time boxing John?

Speaker 2 (08:53):

I have a certain amount of limited time to complete a task. So if I was, I don't know, like setting up a database system, I would give myself till the end of the hour. And then if I was conscious that that was the amount of time I would be allowed under no circumstance, would I be allowed any extra time? And this is something you really have to discipline yourself with and not give exceptions. Then

I would naturally be able to finish something if there was a tight deadline pressing. So for me creating situations of pressure tend to work quite well.

Speaker 1 (09:27):

You sound like you, you can be really tough on yourself. How do you give yourself a break? I mean, how do you alter your work life balance or work patterns to keep up motivation levels?

Speaker 2 (09:39):

Another trick I learned that works quite well for my personality is changing the activity I'm doing drastically. So if I'm coding, right, which was a very introverted activity, a very good way for me to recharge is to do something very different, like calling up a friend and just chatting for a few hours or so if I'm on calls all day, which is quite extroverted, a very good way of me recharging from that is just sitting and reading a book by myself. And to me, that variation in my life tends to recharge me and gives me the mental energy to continue doing a task, even if not super motivated to do it. It's not so much about the time I put in as it is about the mental exertion. So I could say, I don't know, work 15 hours, right? But if it's 15 hours doing the same thing, it's very different than 15 hours total doing like chunks of five hours. You know, coding, emailing talking to people which are very different activities.

Speaker 1 (10:36):

And is there anything else John, you can share on this subject?

Speaker 2 (10:40):

Another trick that works really well for me is limiting decision fatigue, which is to say that usually it's making decisions that are the most mentally draining. So for example, if your team asks you too many questions and you have to think of answers that can be very mentally draining, even if you don't exert a lot of time in doing so, if there's a lot of back and forth in terms of say emails between you and partner organizations who are working with all that little stuff starts adding up and it becomes very exhausting, mentally, the less decisions I have to make in my life, the better, which is why I'm a big proponent of automating daily tasks.

Speaker 1 (11:18):

And can you provide a concrete example as to how this works in practice?

Speaker 2 (11:24):

So I set up Dare to Care packages under this premise of automation. So we have a Slack channel which displays to us you know, updates to our financial situation. And every time we're mentioned on social media, every time a volunteer fills out a form, all of these things happen automatically. So nobody has to do it manually. And the reason I do this is I believe that every day I have a limited amount of decision making capabilities, and I don't want to waste it on making low value decisions. Like, you know, a basic answer to a question somebody could have found if we just pinned it on a Slack channel that everyone could see rather my decision making capability should be reserved exclusively for the highest value decisions that actually shaped the direction of this project.

Speaker 1 (12:15):

Thinking back to my early twenties, when I worked at the outdoor field center, I mentioned in part one, I remember sitting down with the center director, Frank Dawson and asking him what inspired an inspirational leader. Obviously I didn't phrase it quite like that. And I wasn't about to fall into the same trap with my highly talented, yet very humble guest, but I wanted to know what he had witnessed and what had inspired him during his experience with Dare to Care.

Speaker 2 (12:45):

So the most inspirational part of his journey was seeing the passion and effort that some people put in to help the NHS, particularly amongst people who you would not expect to be the ones who were doing the helping. We partnered with an organization called Makers for the NHS, which printed 3D visors. And it was a volunteer group of 50 or so different printers. It was founded by an 18 year old who's not even in university yet. And he has supplied over 7,000 visors to the NHS. Now because of this organization, when I was 18 years old, I was playing video games, not supplying the PPE needs of a country. And then, if that wasn't enough, we soon had an 11 year old who came out to the warehouse and started volunteering with the PPE. And I've also seen videos of an eight year old who was involved in this. So it was really inspiring to see how many good people there were in the world and specifically how many good people took tangible actions to actually make a big difference

Speaker 1 (13:42):

And having dedicated three extremely intensive months of his life to Dare to Care. I was eager to know what John felt he had learned from the experience and what advice he might offer others.

Speaker 2 (13:55):

So my biggest learning doing Dare to Care packages is as much of a personal learning as it is a leadership learning. And it's basically something like this. So we helped a lot of people with Dare to Care, right? We sent about 17,000 PPE items to date and over a thousand care packages with 20,000 meals, total and other central supplies. So that's great. That helped a lot of people, but that's really the tip of the iceberg. If we're looking at the grand scheme of things, this country goes through millions of PPE items, not to mention there are so many other countries with PPE item shortages. There's so many more people who need care packs who are undergoing isolation because they're immunocompromised or they're elderly or whatever. And COVID is hardly the only problem in the world right now, not to mention there are so many secondary effects of that have yet to emerge.

Speaker 2 (14:53):

And there were periods in this lockdown when I was investing 16 hours a day for weeks on end working on this problem. If I'm going to be investing such a huge chunk of my life, it's not enough for me to help a couple of 10,000 people here and there. And one of the biggest bottlenecks to helping more people is money. And one of the things that I got sick of really quickly was this constant process of fundraising, asking people for money, for donations, asking for free space, just essentially relying on other people's approval of your idea to exist too. If you have an idea that you passionately believe in, like Dare to Care packages, you had to go through this process of other people's approval and permission to make it a reality and to scale it. And that really got on my nerves very quickly.

Speaker 1 (15:43):

So the continuous need to fundraise clearly frustrated you, John what's that experience taught you.

Speaker 2 (15:50):

So, my biggest learning from doing Dare to Care is that I never want to be in that position again, in the future. If I have a social impact idea that I believe in, I want to be able to invest huge amounts of my own money into this and not have to rely on other people. And what that means is I've had sort of a life pivot, so to speak

Speaker 1 (16:11):

A life pivot. So do you have a vision to make money which will then allow you to use it for social good?

Speaker 2 (16:19):

So outside of Dare to Care, I am an entrepreneur. I run a couple of businesses in the data consulting space. There's some online marketplaces, there's a lot of stuff. I also don't put in my LinkedIn and the other half of my time, and for this last year has just been helping a bunch of charities and social enterprises for free because I wanted to help them scale and for them to achieve more impact. But I've recently concluded that that is not a good use of my time. Right now, I should be focusing on scaling my businesses and taking them to the next level so that when I do want to come back to the social sector, I can go all in and be able to invest like, just so much more of my own money into an idea I believe in and just help even more people than we have right now with Dare to Care.

Speaker 1 (17:06):

I'm curious, John, the metrics with Dare to Care are pretty impressive in terms of supporting people in future. What kind of numbers are you looking at?

Speaker 2 (17:16):

If I'm going to be investing 16 hours of a day into something, I need to help at least tens of millions of people, all right. Bare minimum, or it's simply not worth my time. And there's been tons of commercialization opportunities. I've been turning down in the last year, simply because I was focused on helping charities, but I've really internalized now that if I want to help more people in the future, I need to be pursuing these opportunities and putting the profit first, because impact then naturally follows if you choose the use the money correctly.

Speaker 1 (17:48):

So what's the main leadership lesson here.

Speaker 2 (17:52):

So the main leadership lesson, I would say here is you should focus on understanding who you want to become. First one is the achievements that you want to have and who is the person that you want to be before you worry about leading others, like change yourself first in a good way before you start changing other people. So leadership comes from within in the same way that if you do a genuinely different idea, that adds real value and how there's a natural, organic multiplication effect that arises from that. If you first focus on changing yourself and becoming the person that other people will naturally want to follow, because you lead by example, I think that improves your leadership

capabilities exponentially, and it makes other people want to follow you instead of you trying to convince them to follow you. And then that's a key distinction.

Speaker 1 (18:49):

As I listened to John, I couldn't help, but hear my internal voice mocking me for being nearly twice as age, but having less than half his wisdom, talking to someone who has a clear philanthropic vision and knows how to pursue it. It's not your regular everyday conversation. Well, at least not for me. So wanting to make the very, most of our final few minutes, I was keen to learn about his advice for aspiring leaders, start-ups, and other people seeking similar goals.

Speaker 2 (19:18):

The biggest piece of advice I would give leaders is this. You should be altruistic and selfish at the same time. Now what on earth do I mean by this? Well, I often see this tension, particularly among social enterprises when they struggle to juggle how they're helping people and also being profitable at the same time. It's the criticism that charities often face when say 20% of the donations goes to maintaining overheads like salary costs and things like that. And it's the praise that private companies get when say 20% of their profits go towards CSR initiatives, even though 80% of their profits goes to themselves. But that's quite weird if you think about it because that private company is actually doing more to help than that charity is, but they received the praise. Whereas the charity receives the criticism. And I think that stems from people thinking that a person is either altruistic or selfish.

Speaker 2 (20:30):

That they're one or the other, but that's wrong. No one is completely selfish or completely altruistic. Even the most selfish person has things that they care about beyond themselves, like their really close friends or family, or at least some kind of costs. And even the most altruistic person cares about themselves to some extent. And if you think otherwise you're either delusional or you're not introspective enough. And it's about accepting altruism and selfishness as intrinsic parts of human nature and being okay. And being able to recognize that you have both of these qualities. Now, obviously some people lean towards one side of the spectrum more than the other side. Some people are more selfish and they are altruistic and the reverse is also true.

Speaker 1 (21:23):

So why is it so important in your opinion, John, for people to understand that true altruistic and selfish selves.

Speaker 2 (21:32):

Now this is so important because these two things are drivers that can motivate you to do great things for the world. For example, I started Dare to Care packages out of altruism because I wanted to help people indeed during COVID-19. But if you're working 16 hours a day for every day, for a month, that altruism tank is going to run dry sooner or later, and it does not have an infinite fuel supply. So then you need to switch techs, so to speak. Can you define another fuel source, which is the selfishness, which is my personal desire to set goals for myself and achievement. So, it's important to me to get more PPE out there and seeing that number count, go up the number of PPE that we have sent increase on our website and increase on our database brings personal satisfaction

as well. And it's also important to make sure that the incentives for personal satisfaction are aligned with the results of social good.

Speaker 2 (22:38):

When that number of PPE items goes up on the site, there's a direct benefit to the NHS member who receives it to the care home staff who gets a new advisor and to the nursery who gets new masks that is making their lives better. Even if when I was sending that PPE, I was more motivated by getting that number count up. So it's not so much about the motivation for me as it is about the impact and recognizing my own personality and how to use those two sides of my human nature, to the maximum benefit of society. In other words, it's using your rationality to be able to control and shape the more emotive aspects of your personality if you're trying to achieve impact. So that would be my biggest piece of advice to recognize and accept these two parts of human nature of altruism and of selfishness and learn how to use these things in the best way possible.

Speaker 1 (23:42):

John, it has been such a pleasure and honour, in fact, a question and listen to you, thank you for your time. Thank you for your achievements. And thank you for making Dare to Care a reality. I am absolutely certain that your work has not just changed lives, but has saved lives. Thanks a lot, Peter,

Speaker 3 (24:02):

It's been a pleasure

Speaker 1 (24:07):

Whilst many books already referenced in this series can be found in the leadership section of any good online or retail bookstore. My recommendation for this episode is slightly different throughout our interview. John Lowe repeatedly referenced the importance of knowing yourself and the best way to get to know what makes you tick. What makes you sing, what helps to make your future meaningful is simply to do things. As I mentioned right at the start of this episode, working at CastleHead Field Centre allowed me to appreciate what made me sing, looking back now. It also taught me the huge value of volunteering and working with givers. Books are vital sources of information, but to make the very, most of your talent, be proactive and be entrepreneurial, go find a cause or an activity that matters to you. Go and engage the giving and find someone who's doing the kind of social good that resonates with your soul. You probably sense ideas and answers already, but if not use the advice from episodes three and five, seek ideas and inspiration by asking people you trust a few good questions. If you can find and make use of opportunities, I guarantee the experience will help you find shape and ultimately accelerate what you want to make happen.

Speaker 1 (25:37):

When this series started there, wasn't a lot of good news going around, but hopefully as this episode has shown, there are glimmers of optimistic, light and a sense albeit small at times of positive uplift in the next episode, which will be released on Monday the 6th of July, I'll be looking at the issue of teamwork to do this. I'll be interviewing start-up business leaders. Who've taken that team through this crisis. We'll be hearing what teamwork lessons have been learned and how newly formed teams can be better shaped to work post lockdown and beyond. And after that, I'll be moving onto the issue of money and money management through all this mayhem. Your feedback is not just

welcomed, it's needed like you. This is the first time I've ever dealt with a pandemic whilst in business. So please keep letting me know your thoughts and questions via the Hitchhiker's Guide to Entrepreneurship blog or via my page on LinkedIn. I love to hear your views, whether it's good or get better. And finally, before we close, let's hear it again for John Lo, whose details are also referenced on the blog page. John, thank you for everything you have done. I am sure you will be a guiding light of inspiration for many. My name's Peter Harrington, and this has been your Start-up Survival Podcast. Go well, stay safe and thank you.