

Agency For Change Podcast : Graham Pansing Brooks and Kyle Cartwright, Founders of SEACHange

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing, and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman, founder and chief strategist of KidGlov, and welcome to another episode of Agency for Change podcast. Today, we are talking with two great guys who believe in the power of main street capitalism to inspire and change the world. Graham Pansing Brooks and Kyle Cartwright are the founders of SEACHange, a company that partners with businesses to help them not only act passionately, but compassionately. Kyle and Graham, it is great to have you here today. You guys are fantastic, I've been waiting to talk to you, to get this scheduled, and I'd love for you to just start. Graham, could you tell me more about what SEACHange does?

Graham Pansing Brooks:

Certainly. SEACHange is a consulting and best practice research firm, and we work with businesses to help them really dive in deep and identify why they exist as a business beyond profit as a bottom-line motivating factor. That really manifests itself in a lot of different ways. We talk with organizations and businesses about company culture. We look into policies that can help facilitate workforce or community engagement. There's a lot of different avenues through which purpose can manifest itself, and our main intent and vision and desire is to help organizations really maximize and amplify the good work that they're already doing and add a layer of intentionality to their business model.

Lyn Wineman:

I love what you're saying there because being an entrepreneur myself, you recognize people get into business for money, but really, they start businesses, I think, based upon passion and purpose. I love what you're doing there. It's a really interesting concept. Kyle, can you tell us more about how the company came about?

Kyle Cartwright:

Sure. I'd love to. Graham and I both kind of came at this at little bit different angles actually but thought, let's put our heads together. The brief history is – Graham, you can sure share if you want to elaborate at all - but Graham did some consulting work in DC and really enjoyed that work and decided to come back home in 2018. I believe it was April 2018 and started SEACHange. That was the birth of the organization itself. Graham and I had been friends for some time before and throughout his time in DC. I was really, certainly excited to have him back in Lincoln and I sure think we're very lucky to have him here in Lincoln, in Nebraska. So, we got to talking about this concept of business as a force for good, social enterprise, corporate social responsibility.

Kyle Cartwright:

The terminology is endless, and Graham was approaching it from an operational, holistic, purpose-oriented, mission, vision, values, top-to-bottom approach of how a business ingrains purpose into its decision-making models and its vendor choices and any activity a business takes...that it's aligned. And I was really thinking very laser-focused into the volunteer and contributions strategy. Businesses, my thought process was, businesses are giving a lot. They are leveraging their resources in really great ways. Maybe they aren't celebrating those or capturing the impact that they are actually achieving. Everyone wants to make a difference in some way. I don't think anybody goes to work thinking I'm going to make this company more money today or I'm going to make more money today. It is a motivator, but it only goes so far, and so I wanted to capture the impact that was being had and help companies further-focus and laser-focus their strategy around where they're giving their time and money.

Lyn Wineman:

Just to follow up on that a bit, Kyle, my banker wishes that I would come to work more often and think about making more money, but I think in the work that you're doing, you're finding that it's not an either or, that businesses can be passionate, compassionate, and financially successful as well, right?

Kyle Cartwright:

Absolutely. We have found that there is an intrinsic value here, but there is also data to back up why it's important to define stakeholders beyond just a shareholder. There are the people, we always say, the people are the best asset of a business. If you focus on that, by doing so, you actually make more money because people are inspired to go to work and to go to bat for the company and for the client.

Lyn Wineman:

I think a lot of us are seeing that right now in particular, as most of our workforce is working from home as we're in the middle of a global pandemic. Knowing that your employees are engaged and behind the mission of your company really helps you feel confident that they are there working as hard as they can work to support the mission of the company.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

I would say to your point, Lyn, now more than ever, especially as we're living in this virtual remote working world, the importance of building culture and finding ways to connect and build the team as a whole is becoming increasingly important. I think that's an issue that businesses around the country and around the world are facing right now - is how to go back to those core values, to that central mission, and really be able to build a cohesive team that is uplifting, engaged, and has that family feel and vibe to it in the midst of this pandemic.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

What I think we're starting to see too, are the businesses that have already started out or already were operating with this sense of commitment to employee engagement, to uplifting their team members, not just from a professional standpoint, but from a personal standpoint - those are the companies, I think, that we're continuing to see thrive during this pandemic. Those where that mentality was innate to their very core DNA and their very nature.

So again, we have the great fortune of being able to work with you and KidGlov and being able to see your core values and the vision and values that you present, again, is inspiring to us every day - to be

able to say this is exactly what business should look like. Operating with family first mentality, encouraging employees, and driving towards that uplifting spirit and mentality is, I think, really the direction that business is moving in general.

Lyn Wineman:

Graham, I'm glad you said that, and I appreciate the shout out. For everybody who's listening, we are working with SEChange and they're really helping us out because culture and corporate responsibility are a big part of our DNA. But there are things, there are fine-tuned adjustments, that we all can make to be better or things that you just do that you can turn into policies that make you better and more compassionate. So, anybody out there that's looking for that type of service, I'm going to give you guys the shout out on that as well.

I'm interested too, in how do two young, successful guys who could really literally do anything and are doing lots of things, how did your path lead you to this? Graham, starting with you? Were you on a playground someday as a ten-year-old going, I want to grow up and be in corporate responsibility?

Graham Pansing Brooks:

Not quite in that way. I'm not sure I knew the words corporate social responsibility until maybe even college. So no, but I think that Kyle will have to, I won't speak for you here either, but I think that our interest was a bit parallel in always having an interest and desire to help others. My career path before SEChange was really focused in the healthcare industry. I was an econ major with a specific focus on the social side of economics, which led me into healthcare. My grandmother had lived with my family for the last 10 years of her life and so I saw the ups and downs of the healthcare industry, positives and negatives, that really provided me an insight and an interest and desire to learn more and engage more with the healthcare industry.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

And so, these intrinsic mentalities of wanting to support and engage with people and find ways to help others was also intrinsic to my career path leading up to SEChange. Really the spark though for me, that sort of shifted or transitioned to corporate social responsibility, impact oriented business models, was a time when I was studying abroad in Geneva, Switzerland and came across some work there that Howard Buffett Jr, a native Nebraskan, was doing with Credit Swiss to help develop and build out their impact investing model. I got really interested, as an econ major, looking at this intersection and collaboration that was occurring with the financial industry and the private sector with NGOs and nonprofit organizations on an international level.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

As I returned to the United States, I became really focused on - how are those policies or how has this type of work become applicable here in the United States? That's when I really got into more of this purpose-oriented workforce, learning more about benefit corporations and B Corps and conscious capitalism, 1% for the planet. It's been kind of a meandering path, but I think that the root and, sort of the core of it, has always been based in wanting to find ways to empower and maximize and amplify the good work of people.

Lyn Wineman:

That is fantastic. Kyle, how about you? Were you that ten-year-old on the playground?

Kyle Cartwright:

You could say that. But, no, and I certainly don't have quite as exotic of experience in Switzerland, but similar to Graham, I grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was not necessarily on the playground dreaming of working with businesses, but I did have really great mentors and a really great upbringing around a shared value for the human existence and the human condition. I had a mother who served in the police force, my mom's partner, who I'll call Dee, she's one of the most generous and giving people that I know, even to this day. I had mentors in my music background who really invested in me. I had a big brother through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. I just had a really strong backing of people who showed me the value of giving of yourself, such that you have a one plus one equals greater than two.

Kyle Cartwright:

So that inspired me from a really young age. And at one point, I don't remember exactly the point, but I told myself as I was thinking about what I wanted to do with my life, I told myself, I never want to do something at the expense of somebody else. I thought public service, I thought emergency services kind of like my mom or I have an uncle who's a firefighter. I thought teacher, which is ultimately what I decided to go to school for, to become a music teacher and really enjoyed that. But during college, I did some internships with some arts administration groups, including the Nebraska Arts Council and Nebraska Cultural Endowment, and found myself moving in that direction and the trajectory of nonprofit work and nonprofit administration.

Kyle Cartwright:

I guess my brief history of the career is cutting my teeth at the Lincoln Community Foundation, where I actually got to meet KidGlov for the first time and you, Lyn, for the first time. And again, as Graham and I build our business, we're really inspired to be working with businesses like KidGlov because we are learning how to set our own priorities and set our own purpose. In fact, just recently, we had a conversation among ourselves about this very thing. What brings you to this work? Why are you focusing in this way on business as a force for good? We talked about these very things, about how we grew up, about these inspirations that kind of brought us to this work, and that brief stint in the nonprofit industry just inspired the way that I want to make a difference in the world. And I think business is a really great opportunity as a way to do that.

Lyn Wineman:

I think the two of you are just great inspiration for people out there to show how friendship and passion and talent and experience can all come together. I'm really excited to watch your future and the trajectory of your company and the trajectory of all the companies that you serve.

So, we've talked about a lot of really great stuff, and we all know that starting a business, especially a business that people really have never heard of before...I mean, to be honest, you are creating a category here. Graham, I'm interested, what are some of the challenges you face both in work, but also as somebody who leads change?

Graham Pansing Brooks:

Lyn, I think as an entrepreneur and business leader yourself, you recognize the ups and downs that come with every day. I think that the overall trajectory is up and I love what I do, but I'd be remiss if I never said that there weren't days that are a bit of a drag and you've got to find a way to get yourself back up and find those peaks.

One of the things that I think has been challenging for us specifically, is also maybe a really positive thing about the environment or the market and community in which we operate. One of the challenges that we experience is really trying to explain where our business model fits into traditional business here in the Midwest, because there is a Midwest mentality that is very, again, as I was saying earlier, has sort of this intrinsic embodiment of give back, of wanting to support the community, of wanting to be good to your employees.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

And as we come and we talk about what SEChange is doing - trying to help businesses identify their “why”, or think about things beyond their bottom line, think about community engagement and employee engagement, a lot of businesses kind of look at us and go, well, duh. I think that's a wonderful aspect to being able to build this business here in Nebraska, that so many businesses already intrinsically understand this. And I think that is something that is really incredible to be able to operate in building a business in a place where that type of mentality exists because I don't think it exists everywhere. So for us, I think that the challenge comes in of recognizing and trying to meet businesses where they're at and say, yes, you are already doing so many incredible things.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

And then there's sort of the shoe drop and it's the, “But”. Okay, well, how can we be more intentional about things? How can we really streamline and provide a more directive, laser-focused vision into your values? Because I think that's where change really is, that's the crucible of change. When you can provide a lot of definitive direction and when you can get very laser-focused on your mission, that's when I think that the opportunities and the impact start to be amplified and expands and is magnified beyond anything we can imagine. And for us, I think the challenge again, is really, really rooted in this celebration of...not that the celebrating is difficult.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

We love to celebrate the businesses that are here, but trying to articulate that this is a journey, that there's no finish line. There's always more that we can iterate on. There's always more that we can do to be better. As in the same way that we continue to push ourselves as individuals every day to be better people, we should be pushing our businesses to be better every day, and so it's a two-sided thing here. But I would say that we would much rather be facing that challenge of trying to explain where we fit into the market rather than trying to explain why this is necessary in the market.

Lyn Wineman:

I'm just thinking, as you're explaining that it's one thing as an individual to push yourself harder because you know your brain. But as a company grows and you get more and more people, helping everyone to understand that mission is not always the easiest thing and I think systematizing these policies, formalizing policies as opposed to just thinking about them really helps it carry through. I can see in the work you're doing with us, how that's going to help it carry through.

So now, Kyle, what advice do you have for people out there who are looking to lead positive change?

Kyle Cartwright:

Well, and I think Graham started to allude to this, but I think that the first thing we always try to work with clients on is to get a very clear understanding of their values and desired impact because we can't

be everything to everyone, and focusing in is the first step. Do you want to make sure that the people who work for you have fulfilling lives, that the environment is not harmed by your activities, that the local economy is stimulated and that more of your neighbors have a greater opportunity for the pursuit of happiness, pursuit of a prosperous life? There's, again, there's a lot of different ways that purpose can manifest itself and we can't be everything. So, we have to get laser-focused on what we can achieve because even the Goliaths of business have what I call scarce resources.

Kyle Cartwright:

They have scarce resources to deploy in the pursuit of purpose. So ultimately, it's really important that we're strategic and realistic about what we can accomplish. Thankfully, business has a really great opportunity to affect a great number of stakeholders, just as I said, including their employees, maybe their vendors, their clients, their community, their environment, the list really goes on. The opportunity is endless, and I think maybe a first step for those wanting to engage in this work is to just decide. Be intentional and then the rest will come naturally, and that's where we're here to help guide as well.

Lyn Wineman:

That first step can be the hardest step, right? I'd love to take this even then a step further. It would seem like it would be a mistake if I had you two on the podcast with me and I didn't ask you, and Graham, let's take this one to you. What are your top recommendations for companies that want to do good while they also prosper and thrive?

Graham Pansing Brooks:

Lyn, I think that's a great question and I think that it builds off of what Kyle was just saying, you've got to be prepared to take that first step. You need to be prepared to take a holistic look at every layer of your organization. The positives, the negatives, the areas of opportunity, everything. And I think that it really starts with an internal perspective from the leadership team, approaching it with an abundance mindset, this mentality that we can be good for our employees, for our community and for our business. When you have that abundance mindset and you recognize the rising tide does lift all ships, then I think that we start recognizing that it's not just a business as a force for good, and that's what we're striving for, but also that good can be a force for business.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

And recognizing that there are opportunities for us to be looking holistically and saying the good work that we're doing can actually help stimulate business for ourselves, and so again, looking at those steps that you want to take and starting to really drive these processes. A lot of the work that we do looks to governance structures, to, as you alluded to earlier, policy creation and template creation to make sure that every layer of the organization has a direction and visibility into the values of the business...whether that's employee benefit programs or employee incentive programs, or community outreach opportunities, or governance structures, and policies.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

We talk a little bit too, with clients about legal structures, and really being prepared to take a holistic look at everything within your business model. That's not always easy to be prepared to open up and do the deep dive that's necessary to get there. So I think it's first starting with yourself and being prepared to have that abundance mentality, that this is all going to be positive and that we're moving in a good

direction, and then be prepared to take a really deep dive into your organization and look across the board at everything that's going on.

Lyn Wineman:

That's really great. Great advice. Now I know though, some people will be skeptical when you use terms like purpose driven, abundance mindset. Sometimes those terms feel a little soft for business. I mean, Kyle, really, can you help us? Help give me some sense of, can people really do good and be profitable at the same time?

Kyle Cartwright:

That is a really great question and one, I think, we're faced with daily and one of the challenges that we have worked to overcome. I think we're certainly getting there, and we've got a lot of anecdotal and empirical evidence to kind of back it up, but again, just to reiterate, this is a question I think really is easily answered by the companies who have a general commitment. And again, in Nebraska, it's baked into the DNA of business because we have a certain interdependence that maybe you don't find elsewhere. So sure there are sacrifices that will have to be made, but in a competitive marketplace where consumer and talent demands are shifting towards this greater accountability to more than just profit, it's the companies that are investing in doing good, that are positioning themselves to attract and retain the clients and talented workforce, that will propel themselves into the next generation of the economy.

Kyle Cartwright:

To get into the data though, we can also share that recently the 2017 Gallup's State of the American Workforce found that businesses able to articulate their "why" have a competitive advantage for their workforce and consumer attention. In fact, employees are 3.5 times more likely to be engaged, and this translates into businesses seeing a 41% reduction in absenteeism, seventeen percent increase in productivity, and you can just imagine the turnover rate, training, it's a very costly activity. If you're retaining people and they're feeling engaged in their work, they're more productive. What Gallup found is that this translated into 21% greater profitability for the companies studied.

Lyn Wineman:

That's amazing. I don't know a business owner out there that wouldn't want to improve their profitability by 21%. That's fantastic.

Kyle Cartwright:

And another quick piece of evidence that backs that up as well is *Firms of Endearment*, which was a book written that tracks the S&P 500 companies who had a sense of purpose, a defined purpose, and among their peers were seen as leaders in that space. They tracked these companies over 15 years and the benchmark was for the S&P, over that 15 years, a 10% rate of return year over year. And the companies who had that defined purpose actually were about a 20% annual increase rate of return. That kind of backed up that 21% greater profitability from Gallup, the *Firms of Endearment* study did. So, we are seeing that there is absolutely some empirical evidence to this work, that it is important, and it also generates good business outcomes.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic. I recently talked with the marketing director of Rowdy Mermaid Kombucha on the podcast, and they have changed their whole corporate values system around being healthy, but not just a healthy product, being a healthy company that supports a healthy environment. I love to see companies that are really doing that, and my sense is that consumers are becoming more and more savvy and are choosing to support those companies that are doing good as well. So, I think there's a nice thing there.

Now this next question, people tell me this is the hardest question that I ask on the podcast, but it's my favorite question because I love motivational quotes. I would love to get from each of you a few words of wisdom that we could use to inspire others. Graham, let's start with you.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

All right. You got it. One of my favorite quotes actually comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson, who I think probably penned - What lies behind us and what lies before us are but tiny matters compared to what lies within us. I think that that's applicable not only as individuals, but I think it's applicable to our businesses and organizations as a whole.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that, and you just said that all from memory too. You weren't reading it so I can tell that it really inspires you.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

It really does.

Lyn Wineman:

Kyle?

Kyle Cartwright:

I'm glad you sent this ahead of time because I've got a few quotes, but the one that I wanted to share with you, I wanted to make sure I got it right and didn't butcher it. So, I will read from my text here, Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is all that ever has. That was Margaret Mead, a very inspirational woman, a US anthropologist.

Lyn Wineman:

That is one of my favorites as well, Kyle. So those are both great, you two. Thank you so much for sharing those. I appreciate that. We've come to the end of our podcast and I really feel like I could talk to the two of you all day long and I know our meetings always run over because I do like talking to you all day long, but for our listeners who would like to learn more about the work of SEChange or get in touch with you, how can they find you?

Graham Pansing Brooks:

They can visit us on our website and that's SEChange, S-E-A-C-H-A-N-G-E-L-T-D .com, or you can just drop us a line. My email is Graham, G-R-A-H-A-M-P-B @SEChangeltd.com. Feel free to reach out to us. We'd love to get in touch, whether it's talking about your business and an understanding of where you're going, or even just hopping on a phone call or grabbing a coffee. This is a passion of ours so we're always here to talk and discuss whatever's on your mind.

Lyn Wineman:

Gentlemen, congratulations on your success and your great ideas, and I can't wait to see both where you go and where the companies you consult with go. I think great things are ahead.

Graham Pansing Brooks:

Well, thank you for having us. We are big fans of you and KidGlov and the work you're doing in our community, and we're grateful for your leadership here in Lincoln and beyond.

Lyn Wineman:

Thanks guys so much.

Announcer:

You've been listening to Agency for Change. If you're enjoying these inspiring stories, please subscribe. Is there a changemaker you'd like to recommend for this podcast? Just visit the KidGlov website at kidglov.com to share, or to listen to more stories about the people behind positive change.