**AT THE EDGE PODCAST**



**SEASON 1, EPISODE 3**
**JAMIE NOTTER AND MADDIE GRANT – MAKE CULTURE VISIBLE, FACE THE FUTURE**
**Interviewed by Michael Lee**

**Jamie Notter** helps leaders create stronger cultures and upgrade their workplaces, based on a deeper understanding of their organizational genetic code. He brings twenty-five years of experience in conflict resolution, generational differences, leadership, and culture change to his work with leaders around the world. A sought-after keynote speaker, Jamie also serves as adjunct faculty at Georgetown University.

**Maddie Grant** is an expert digital strategist and culture designer whose superpower is skillful shepherding of organizations through cultural and digital transformation. Maddie was the founder of SocialFish, a successful digital strategy consulting firm and home of one of the most visited and respected blogs written for nonprofit and association executives.

Together Jamie and Maddie run **PROPEL**, a coaching and consulting company that helps companies achieve culture-driven growth, impact, and success. They have written three books together:
- *Humanize: How People Centric Organizations Succeed in a Social World* (2011*)*
- *When Millennials Take Over: Preparing for the Ridiculously Optimistic Future of Business* (2015)
- *The Non-Obvious Guide to Employee Engagement* (2019).

**In this episode,** Jamie and Maddie talk about redefining engagement and culture, the challenges of returning to the office, the critical importance of metrics and measurement, and the value of technology in creating collaboration, transparency, inclusion, and innovation.

**Michael Lee**

*Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant have been working together around corporate culture issues for over a decade. Their first book came out in 2011, called Humanize: How People-Centric Organizations Succeed in a Social World. Their newest book is called The Non-Obvious Guide to Employee Engagement, and places them squarely as world leaders in the engagement conversation. And today, they are here with us to talk about life at the edge. Welcome, Jamie and Maddie.*

**Jamie Notter**

We're excited to be here.

**Maddie Grant**

Thank you so much.

**Michael Lee**

*So let's dive right in. Tell us what is engagement.*

**Jamie Notter**

So employee engagement, this is why we sort of got into this business to begin with, it's defined pretty poorly even within this field. Everyone defines it broadly speaking as some sort of emotional connection to the organization, it's that energy that you feel because you love working there and you give that discretionary effort, and it's awesome, it's very intangible. And I think that's a piece of it, it's just that that's actually just kind of the result of engagement. That's not the source of it.

For us, engagement is that feeling, that connection, that energy that you get when you work at a place where you can be successful, and deeply successful personally in your role, and as part of an organization that's successful. So it's that success that to me defines when employee engagement's going to be present.

Our bias is to focus on culture. You know, if you've got a culture hammer, everything looks like a culture nail, but I actually think with employee engagement, fine-tuning your culture so that it makes the organization and everyone in it more successful will have a much bigger impact on employee engagement than any kind of engagement-focused activity. If you try and try and make people be engaged, you will try and make them happy. You will give them better benefits. You will give them more time off. You will have Taco Tuesdays. Whatever it is that you think is going to make people happy in their job, we do that in order to increase engagement.

**Maddie Grant**

You cannot be happy all the time. It's just not natural. There's ebbs and flows. And in fact, you don't really know what happiness is unless you've been unhappy. Even in the context of the workplace, different people are happy at different times. So this whole idea that employee

engagement is about satisfaction and happiness, we just believe that there's something really wrong with that.

*Michael Lee*
*I'm gonna ask you something I should have asked you at the beginning. Why employee engagement, culture, these topics? Why do you guys have this passion to talk and think about employee engagement?*

**Maddie Grant**
We actually both come at this from different historical perspectives in our work. So for me, I'm ultimately a digital strategist. So I didn't really know it at the time, but all of my work was around culture change. Jamie was coming at it from patterns of generations, and how that was changing and accelerating. Again, the social internet was sort of the context. When we came together and started writing our first book back in 2011, we realized that it was about culture change. And so over the years, we've kind of doubled down on culture change now, so now we overtly work on culture.

**Jamie Notter**
Part of why we do culture is because people operate as if culture is invisible to them, so it's about taking what's invisible and bringing it to the visible. The visible part is, Oh, we don't know how to do Facebook. The invisible part is, We don't trust our people to take action by themselves. The real leverage for success, for growth, for uncovering new value is in bringing what was invisible up to the visible. When you do that, then you have an opportunity to make those gains that surprise people: How did you do that much that quickly? You only do that if you bring stuff up.

The way your culture does innovation, where everyone talks about being creative but no one actually runs experiments or does Beta testing or actually does the practices of innovation, like you're promising innovation and you're not doing it? That's gonna frustrate me! You know what I mean? And no one's addressing that. Why aren't you looking at where your culture is creating friction, get rid of that friction, you do that and people will look around and say, This place is awesome. I love working here.

**Maddie Grant**
There's also a whole new angle related to this in terms of the pandemic, and the effects of everybody working remotely, and I think we've only barely started to see this. But as people are invited to return to the physical workplace, there's just going to be an exodus, all the people who realize just how much they hated their job, they, they won't be back. Your fifteen percent actively disengaged, they're looking for a new job right now, because they know what it's like to be working in a different kind of environment, working from home, and comparing notes with everybody else working from home. And lots of companies are allowing their employees to work remotely forever. But the ones that don't, are going to really see something different when they try and get everybody back. And we're starting to see that now.

*Michael Lee*
*One of the very first things in the book you point out is the grossly small number of engaged employees, and the sort of grossly large number of actively disengaged.*

**Jamie Notter**
Gallup does their annual report on the state of engaged employees, and it was pretty sure it was after the book came out, but the next report was bragging about record high engagement. In the press release, granted it's a press release, so it's supposed to sound positive, it's like: Record high engagement! The highest level of highly engaged employees in fifteen years! I'm like, Oh, sweet, let me check it out. And it was like 35%, instead of 33%! What other part of the business world would tolerate this low ROI? Billions and billions and billions for twenty-five years for a 2% gain? Show me a senior manager that makes that pitch to their CEO and doesn't lose their job. And yes, don't get me started on the 20%, or 17%, or whatever it is, that are actively disengaged, that hate their work so much they're trying to sabotage it. And we're like, oh, we should try and reduce that percentage of people who are actively sabotaging. You want to reduce that percentage? That's a goal? We will tolerate - 15%, that's great, we only have 15% rowing in the wrong direction! There's a real head-in-the-sand sort of mentality in the engagement space, because we want it to work, and we're not getting to the deeper questions.

*Michael Lee*
*It's weird when you say that over the years it consistently is sitting around 33 to 35% engaged. Is there some kind of built-in unseen law of work that keeps it at that number? Why is it consistently so low, but so similar?*

**Jamie Notter**
I still think most organizational cultures do not design their organization around the needs of the employees. They design it around the needs of management. Organizations that have embraced this move to what we call the future of work are actually being much more employee-centric. They're customizing the experience for the employees so that it'll work for them, not just the organization. But we haven't honestly fundamentally shifted from that core industrial premise, which is the organization's in control and the employee must do what I say. And when you have that framework, you're never going to get more than a third that are truly successful personally. The idea that we're hitting that wall that we can't get past is because we have intentionally designed our organization to meet the needs of a small number of people.

**Maddie Grant**
There's a traditional mindset that work kind of sucks. It's a very common kind of trope that you work in an office in a cubicle and you pay your bills that way, but you hate your life.

**Jamie Notter**
That's it. And as long as we keep doing that, we'll meet a small number of people, they'll be engaged, and we're going to lose people on the edges. And everyone says, it's impossible to

meet everyone's needs. I question that. I wonder what we could be doing to meet a much larger percentage of needs. I wonder how we could shift our management approach to address 70%, not 30%. And I think there's potential there, but it's kind of a black box right now, we don't know exactly what it looks like.

**Maddie Grant**

I think there's a general trend towards companies wanting to be more innovative, but they might bring in some Lunch and Learn speaker to talk about their book or something like that. And that's pretty much the extent of their innovation practice. But in fact, what if they actually valued experimentation and they gave all employees some time and some part of responsibility in their literal job role description to experiment on certain things, and tracked how many experiments happened per month, and not just the results of those experiments? What if you as an organization allowed all kinds of different people within your staff to present new ideas?:

**Jamie Notter**

For me, the intention behind it is we're unlocking the power of innovation, we're giving people a chance to experiment, not only because - and I think this is true - it will generate more results for the organization. If we can experiment more, we can learn more from it, we're going to unlock value we couldn't reach before. That's cool. But we're also letting people follow their passion. You know what I mean?

It's kind of old school, but the Google twenty-percent time idea where you can do anything you want in that twenty percent of the time. Part of that was organizational, to innovate and create new value. But part of that is, if I'm really passionate about something, I get to go try that, and when I get to do that, I feel more successful in my job internally, particularly if my experiment pays off. And if it turns into something cool that we end up selling and making millions off, you know what I mean? But tapping into that personal power, that's where it connects to engagement, because it's success at these different levels, not just success for the organization, but success for me personally. And, as Maddie said, so many of the organizations we work with resist even the concept of experimentation.

We're talking with a company right now that owns their own building and is trying to figure out how to get people back into the office and how they're going to do that. They know that it's going to be different now, because they've been working all remote, and so they're not going to all come back. But that means they have space they're not sure what to do with and they're biting their nails, What do we do? I'm like, Well, why don't you take one of your floors and make it an experiment floor? Why don't you take that floor, don't redesign your whole office but take that floor and let it go to a small group that says, You know what, I wish we had our office structured in this way that would make us more successful? And try it out. Because you got a whole building and it's been empty for a year anyway, so run some experiments, see what works. And they're like, Oh, that's really interesting. I'm like, Why have you not thought about this before? It's such an opportunity, right now, in terms of office space and redesign and figuring that piece out, where we have a chance to do it differently, where you couldn't do it differently before, because it's expensive to redo your office, and it seems like a big lift. Now you got to manage this because it's all different.

So experiment, and design your experiments, let people design their own experiments around what they think will make them more successful. And if it works, I'm telling you, I guarantee you'll see the engagement piece go up.

**Maddie Grant**
Instead of thinking about cubicles like they've had the whole time in the past, they've started to think more about how they could bring their customers in on a regular basis and make a big piece of the beautiful building into a true event space. So that leads into much deeper business model innovation, a change in their actual goals and objectives.

**Jamie Notter**
I think that everyone right now is still a little bit back on their heels. The whole transition, at least in the US, with the pandemic and moving to an all-remote office where three weeks before you would have been told you can't be all-remote, because I can't manage the work and it won't work and we can't do this. And then suddenly they did it. And then they had to adjust some more. And now they're adjusting to go back and everyone's feeling a little overwhelmed. In that moment of overwhelm, you want to narrow your focus. So they get narrow, and they're like, let's look at the logistics. What do we need to do about this? How do we solve this problem? What technology do I need in the conference room? They get myopic, and they're missing the bigger opportunity.

*Michael Lee*
*Where do you see things heading right now? Does it seem like it's a positive direction? Or do you see a lot of reaction going to be happening towards the old safe way of doing things?*

**Jamie Notter**
When you're uncertain, you fail to take action usually. So I see a lot of people treading water and not sure what to do. I think it's going to turn around. People are going to see that, in fact, what's happened in the last year is structural change. The balance of power between employers and employees has shifted, because we just proved what we said was impossible, which is we can be very flexible, we can let you work when you want, how you want and where you want. That gives employees more power, which I think scares managers, but I don't think it should. They should welcome this. It's the direction we've been going for a hundred years. We're not going to turn this boat around. The organizations that have figured out how to embrace employees having that power, how to convert that into saying, Oh, you've got so much power, let's use that to make you more successful - those are the ones that are going to come out on top. It's just it's a big mind shift.

*Michael Lee*
*Do you foresee the measures of engagement actually going down somewhat at first?*

**Jamie Notter**

Right now people are at each other's throats in organizations. My original background's in the field of conflict resolution, and I've got like five people calling me a week saying, Can you help me with internal conflict? Because people are running out of steam for dealing with this new made-up way of working, because it doesn't seem permanent yet. So I could definitely see a decline. If you ask people, Hey, are you super satisfied with the way your manager's treating you? All the traditional engagement questions, you know, do you really feel like you have enough resources to be successful? I can see all of those numbers declining from this point, compared to maybe two years ago, pre-pandemic.

**Maddie Grant**

The most primed-for-innovation type of companies will jump at this opportunity. We've already seen some of the big start-ups letting everybody stay remote, for example. Which is not necessarily innovative. But honestly, sadly, it always starts at the top. You have to have leaders of the company who see the opportunity.

**Jamie Notter**

The more you can create an organization and a culture that makes everyone successful, the more engaged they will be, which means your route to improving engagement is culture change. It's switching, changing up your culture, so that what's valued actually drives more success. I know it's a boring metaphor, but we talk about coming up with plays in your playbook that will move the needle on culture, that will make people more successful.

I love Technology as a section of plays, because it's tangible, and people can wrap their head around it. If one of your problems is that nobody knows what everyone's doing, and why I'm so unsuccessful is because marketing didn't even realize that I'd created this new product, and they launched this other thing that isn't even done, and why didn't they know that? These are the complaints you hear in organizations all the time. This silo doesn't know what this silo is doing, now we're behind, and it's terrible, and I hate my job. That's where it comes from. Well, if that's your problem, then you need a technology that will enable everyone to see what everyone else is doing all the time. There are tons of software programs that you can run that will enable people to see what's happening real-time in your organization. Running a play would be implementing this particular kind of software. There's plays in how you design your organization. There's plays in all the processes you run.

We wanted to make this really tangible, that both changing culture, which people think is really, really hard, and I can't do it, and it'll never work and it takes eight years. If you can change the numbers you put on your monthly dashboard, you can change culture. That'll switch people's attention, that will change their behavior. If that makes you more successful, then you've done it. But that's a simple process change. And there's almost an unlimited number of process changes you could make, all of which would change - if you do them right - change the culture in a way that makes people more successful. We wanted to take it out of the realm of, I need an engagement team that is going to come up with our new engagement slide deck that we're going to share at the all-hands meeting and tell people that we want to be more agile...

No! You want to be more agile, then change your reporting processes so that things happen faster. You know what I mean? This is really concrete and simple. You just need to change the way you do things within this sort of structure that we provided that'll get these results. It's not rocket science.

**Maddie Grant**
To us, it's concrete and simple. To most people, culture is still this soft, woolly thing that's hard to define and hard to pin down, and you just have a culture but you don't really know what it is, and even if you say you know what it is, it's not actually what you say it is.

There's definitely a hurdle for us in terms of helping people understand how simple and concrete it can be. But also, and I hate to continually go back to the pandemic situation, but designing your organization around the needs of your employees, this is a perfect example, a concrete example that everyone understands, that you need to do that. Say you have staff, they've been remote, now twenty of them are desperate to come back to the office, because they can't stand to be at home, with the kids running around and the dog barking and all of that, another twenty will never come back to the office even if you give them a promotion, they're very happy working from home, even if they live a block away from the office, they see zero point in coming back. And then you have another twenty who would actually love to come back, they miss their colleagues, but they want to come back and have brainstorming meetings, and have collaborative types of discussions with other people which is definitely better done in person than in Zoom.

So how do you manage a workplace/workspace that accommodates for these different needs at different times? Every company will have to figure that out for themselves. We can't give you the answer to that. But every company is probably faced with this exact practical issue right now. Because if they force everyone to come back, they'll lose people. If they force everyone to stay remote, they'll lose people.

In terms of culture, very few organizations take the time to actually understand where they're starting from, so they go immediately to the ideal culture, what they want, which is your point B. If you can start at the beginning and start really understanding what your culture is, that would be a simple way to get really granular in terms of how people experience the workplace in terms of innovation, collaboration, inclusion, transparency, there's a bunch of different sort of cultural markers that we measure. But it's how people experience the workplace, there's no sort of emotion in it. Is it like this? Or is it not like this?

From that kind of understanding of your culture, you can decide, Is this what we want to be or not in each particular area. When you have this conversation, you immediately start coming up with ideas and solutions immediately, because you see those patterns that are happening.

**Jamie Notter**
Culture is about what's valued, because what's valued drives behavior. Your organization has lots of behavior in it. It is driven by the fact that you have a culture. As Maddie said, you may not know what your culture is, but you've got a culture that is telling people that some stuff is valued here and some stuff isn't. As long as my department is successful, I get my bonus.

That tells me this culture values me being successful in my department. Whether the other department is successful doesn't impact that. The bonus is just one piece of it, but that's something in the organization that tells you here's what's valued.

And so every organization has a whole bunch of words, actions, and tangible aspects of workplace that tell you, this is what's valued here. That drives behavior. We can talk about exactly what's valued around innovation. We can talk about what's valued around collaboration. We can get to the bottom of it.

***Michael Lee***
*In the book, you simplify it quite a bit by saying that we should look at this scale being from traditionalist to futurist, rather than the traditional school.*

**Jamie Notter**
Management was invented a hundred years ago, early 1900s. We really didn't have management before that, because we didn't have this kind of economy that we have. Organizations didn't exist like they do. That we hit that industrial transformation, early 1900s, we came up with management. All MBA programs, management schools, they were invented in the Twenties and Thirties. They didn't exist before. Management was invented in the early 20th century, perfected through about the mid 20th century. That's what we consider traditional management. It's command and control, don't share information unless you have to, innovation is scary, change is hard. You think back to the Thirties, Forties, Fifties, the manufacturing mentality - that's traditional management.

In the last ten, fifteen, twenty years, it's starting to get turned on its head. To have innovation be a core management, ideology and practice is kind of a new thing. That's more futurist.

The organizations we studied as case studies in *When Millennials Take Over,* they are behaving in radically different ways and succeeding wildly. They are doing innovation. They are very transparent. They are unbelievably agile. All of these things you read about in the business press, where these things are very present in their cultures - that's future of work. And in our view, we are headed towards future of work. We are headed towards organizations that are agile, collaborative, inclusive, transparent, innovative.

Most organizations right now are a bit of a mix: we value collaboration, we just don't do it well in the silos; we value innovation concepts, but we're not so great at the practices. We're kind of halfway. Being able to see where you are is really critical for deciding which parts of this journey towards futurist are most important for you right now.

***Michael Lee***
*Give us some straightforward tips that we haven't touched on yet in terms of how companies listening to this can improve their engagement.*

**Maddie Grant**

The key is what we've been saying this whole time around helping people be successful. So as a simple tip, just figure out how to listen better to your employees and to understand how they can be more successful. It'll be different for different individuals and different for different organizations. But trying to listen is that first step.

**Jamie Notter**

My go-to these days is to work on your metrics, internal metrics, because to Maddie's point, if you really need to get clear on what drives success, a lot of us then say, Oh, well the success are the targets that we set at the beginning of the year, and we have to hit them by the end of the year. 70% of your employees, their work doesn't really connect to that big metric that the CEO set or that the senior team set. And I feel like I'm spinning my wheels. How can I define my own success on a daily basis, on a weekly basis?

I feel like organizations are not disciplined in letting people create those metrics. And then within success metrics, you've got the lagging indicators, or the end process metrics, where you're like, Okay, by the end of the quarter, by the end of the year, we need to hit this number. Be disciplined in defining what that number is in a way that connects to the work I'm doing, but also get some metrics that will tell me halfway if I'm on target. We're not very good at leading indicator metrics.

If we were better at metrics, I think we could turn the numbers around in terms of people feeling successful, which would hit the engagement piece. So if you had to do one thing, I'd do an internal review of metrics.

*Michael Lee*

*Sounds like in terms of the playbook, you're back to lots of communication using open technologies, things that allow people to share stuff, monitor stuff and connect all the time.*

**Maddie Grant**

Organizations need to be learning environments, right? They need to use data to learn about what's working and what's not. They need to have processes for communication that is better than before. They need to have processes for sharing information that is better than before. But the point of all of that is to learn. Constantly evolving through learning and experimentation is ultimately at the core, I think.

*Michael Lee*

*Thank you very much for being here. We really are honored and appreciate greatly having you both here today with us.*

**Maddie & Jamie**

You're very welcome. Thanks again for having us. This was a definitely a fun conversation. We would be happy to continue it some time, I'm sure.