

## This CEO Is Stunning a Sleepy Industry With Culture Change--and Surprising Results

CEO of National Life Group, Mehran Assadi, has defied odds to drive astonishing growth--with a powerful cause-driven culture as his co-pilot.

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Mehran Assadi, Transformative CEO. CREDIT: Courtesy Margaret Fox

When you think of the life insurance industry, words like “innovative”, “red-hot”, or “game-changing” probably don’t come to mind.

Those words are reserved for just about anything Elon Musk tweets (probably while on the toilet).

But then you probably don’t know of National Life Group,

the fastest growing life insurance company in the country over the last decade with remarkable employee engagement levels and agent retention four times the industry average.

It’s a company that compelled authors Jackie and Kevin Freiberg (who wrote the Southwest Airlines success story into prominence) to take it on as their next book.

Transformative CEO Mehran Assadi (recently voted Chairman as well) shared with me the secret recipe to National Life's astonishing success in a category of sameness.

It soon became obvious this isn't business as usual.

### **1. Having a useful mission statement should be a mission.**

Let's face it. Most corporate mission statements are about as inspiring as tax law. It's like someone pulled from the Book of Blather and hired an intern to paint the words on the wall of the main foyer.

Not at National Life Group. Their mission is a simple, powerful, and values-driven cause: Do good. Be good. Make good.

Do good for customers and the community. Be good at what you do and to each other. Make good on your promises.

Employees remember this statement and are compelled to bring it to life.

It's grounded in a reframing of the life insurance industry. Assadi helped all to realize that they're doing heroic work and that their profession is about love (buying life insurance is, in fact, a selfless act).

Yes, he's a CEO who uses the word "love". In fact, L.O.V.E. at National Life Group has come to mean "Live Our Values Everyday".

National Life Group has found their spirit-lifting (and performance raising) cause. As Assadi told me, When you find your "why", you find your way.

And it's changed everything.

### **2. Succeed with culture and it becomes the genie in the bottle.**

Related to the first point, when you uncork positive culture change the troops get a taste of how it changes everything about their jobs. Once that happens, you can't put it back in the bottle--it's the new, desired norm.

Oddly enough, companies can recover from the wrong culture change. But with the right one, you can never turn back because the organization now knows what good looks like.

That's a condition of success we can all deal with, so it's worth getting the right culture change in place--one driven by values, purpose, and a sense of meaningful mission.

### **3. Want servant leadership? Measure it.**

If National Life Group's clear, cause-like mission is the engine of their remarkable success, then servant leadership is their chassis.

Many companies hope for servant leadership, National Life measures for it.

Six years ago, the company started a once-a-year process of collecting feedback for their top 200 leaders (from at least 20 people each) on how they were faring as a servant leader.

Not coincidentally, the same year they started doing this, sales began increasing every year--by double digits.

### **4. Put some teeth into the platitude "people are our greatest asset."**

In addition to establishing the evaluation of servant leadership skills, Assadi created a Chief People Officer position to do work such as defining what makes a healthy workforce, the profile of the person the company wants to hire, and how to train and retain their people.

He created a physical "People Center" on the company campus, turning the HR function into a unit all about people development, advancement, retention, and yes, even happiness.

Layer on top of all of this the humble, authentic, vulnerable way Assadi leads, (and the trickle-down effect it has on other leaders) and you can see from a mile away that at National Life Group "people are our greatest asset" is religion, not rhetoric.

### **5. Leadership isn't a right, it's a privilege.**

Assadi encourages everyone to remember this.

He takes time each week for personal reflection, to critically assess how he could have been a better leader that week. He openly shares with his team what he's working on to enroll them in his improvement efforts.

With Assadi, and those in his arena, leadership is a gift, not a given.

It may seem daunting to enact change that lifts aspirations and actions towards something more meaningful.

You can always start small with what you've learned here. If a business as old as insurance can elicit a renaissance, you too can be a da Vinci of your own domain.

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