

TotalPicture Radio Transcript: Dave and Wendy Ulrich

["The Why of Work"](#)

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**Intro:**

Dave Ulrich: *I think there will this Marshall Plan where we say as we come through recovery, how do we learn to work with you so that we can retain our best and brightest people? The metaphor for that and it's going to take a minute to describe because it just captured it for us. We didn't put it in the book. In 2004, a television show was started called The Apprentice and everybody has seen it and knows the basic assumption that there are two teams of 12 each. They go through a series of tasks. The ruler king, if you will, sits by at a lovely desk – Donald Trump in the US – and decides at the end of the show that somebody is fired and then at the end of the series, one of these lucky, lucky people through their gifts and their talents and their ability to beat everybody else is hired. There is one winner.*

*Well, that's the mindset of leadership I think in the war for talent, and there's one person left standing at the end of the game and they now get to sit behind the table and do the same thing to somebody else. What great entertainment. By the way, it's fine, it's entertaining and it's atrocious leadership.*

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**Peter Clayton:** Welcome to a special leadership channel podcast on TotalPicture Radio featuring Dave and Wendy Ulrich, brought to you by Taleo. This is Peter Clayton reporting.

Dave and Wendy, welcome to TotalPicture Radio.

**Wendy:** Hey, we're so glad to be here Peter. Thanks for inviting us.

**Dave:** Thanks Peter. It's great to be here.

**Peter:** Thank you. I met Dave at the HCI National Summit in Tucson, Arizona this spring where he delivered a really engaging and completely revised overnight I might add, keynote presentation.

Dave, you told the audience the new talent metaphor was the Marshall Plan. Can you kind of expand on that and tell us what you meant?

**Dave:** About a decade ago, a little more than that, a really good study was done by Ed Michaels who is a primary investigator for McKinsey called *The War for Talent* and he published a book and they got a lot of very good press. It said there was a mindset in talent of win/lose and there was a war and you got to win, and the more we've been thinking about it coming out of the recession is that there is a flaw with that. If there's a winner and loser, you have a lot of losers and only a few winners, and I went back and did minor history work. I'm not a brilliant historian and said, at the end of World War I, the Allies signed the Versailles treaty which basically put reparations and punishment on the Axis, those who they defeated, and that fermented World War II. Well, at the end of World War II, they got smart and they built what was called the Marshall Plan named after George Marshall, so I went back and read what he thought about and his basic premise was, if and when we confine cooperation among those who may have been our enemies, we will build a better world. We'll make everybody winners, and I thought that is the right metaphor coming out of this recession. It's not a winner and a lot of losers, it's a lot of winners and how do we begin to make that happen.

**Peter:** I think that's a really interesting metaphor and I think you're right because coming out of this recession, it seems to me that this is a very difficult kind of environment and what's going on especially in corporate America today is quite different than previous recession we've experienced over the last 15, 20 years.

**Dave:** Absolutely. We're clearly facing a jobless recovery where we aren't going to add as many jobs as we are going to have economic recovery. We also think – and this is some of the work Wendy and I have been doing is that – there's an economic recession but there also tends to be underneath that an emotional or psychological recession, and even though we may get economics, or bail out of some other kind of financing program, we have to rediscover the spirit and the passion that people might need to have.

**Peter:** The work you guys have been doing, your new book is titled *The Why of Work: How Great Leaders Build Abundant Organizations That Win* and just so the audience knows, Dave is a professor at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan and a partner in The RBL Group and

Wendy is a practicing psychologist. How did you guys come to the decision to collaborate on this book?

**Wendy:** Great question, Peter. To be honest, it was a long decision. We worked on some of these ideas for many years and just conversations together, sort of like the conversation we had this morning as we were walking around the mountains doing our exercise, but we realize that we each bring sort of a different perspective to this issue. Dave certainly is so good at the organizational side of this and has been looking at the organizational implications for how people work and what they do that makes work more meaningful for many, many years. I look at it as a more personal question as I deal with clients who are struggling with their own questions of what gives meaning to life and at a more personal basis, what matters to them and how do they sort out the problems and cope with the stresses in their life. We realized that we had maybe some different perspectives that if we brought together could help people at both the individual level and at the organizational level to address this question.

**Peter:** To Dave's point a little bit earlier, Wendy, one of the obvious byproducts of this recession is stress at work, at home, financial stress, many people who still have jobs are doing the jobs of the two or three people in their department who were laid off last year on top of their own job and the opening chapter of your book, you write about a woman who's name is Vicky living in an all too familiar scenario for what I've just outlined. Can you tell us a little bit about Vicky's story and what are some coping skills that you help your clients with in trying to navigate what's going out there today?

**Wendy:** You explained Vicky's story quite well. Actually, the problem of kind of going in to the workplace was sort of our idealism on our shirtsleeve and finding once we get there that things are kind of rough right now. As you say, people are doing the jobs of two people. Sometimes, the threat of layoff is real.

In the story we presented about Vicky, she's looking at first one round of cuts and then a second round of cuts and even though she survives the cuts, she can feel the axe blade sort of at her throat and kind of wondering if she's going to be next, and we know from how people's brains work that we just as human beings, our brains don't function well in that kind of an environment, when we are in a state of constant threat, when we're constantly worried about the unfairness of things that are going on and the uncertainty of things that are going on.

We experience that as a state of threat and it's like being stared down by a bear; you're not thinking your most clearly when you're under that kind of physical threat and you're not thinking clearly under emotional threat as well, and even though we may rally our resources to deal with that in a short term for a period of time, we have to deal with that sense of anxiety and threat on an ongoing basis. It just begins to deplete us physically and emotionally, and

we literally know that our brains stop working as well. We are not able to problem solve as well, we aren't as creative. The drain on our brains is physically real. There's just not as much energy in our body available to go to the parts of our brain that we need to be able to problem solve and do well.

The coping skill is, it's kind of interesting, one way to think about is sort of like a bank account... or just your body; if you're hungry and you're not bringing in resources, you're not bringing in nutrition and liquids and so forth, you can exercise for a period of time and do really well, but after awhile your body wears down and it's hard to keep going, and if we've got a bank account, you can keep drawing on that bank account for a long time but at some point, you start to go into debt, and unless there's something to bring those resources into play, something's got to give.

One of the things we talked about is sort of that demand resource balance and the demands are probably not going to go away in the near future, so the question becomes, how do we bring the resources in for ourselves and for the people we work with to help them cope with those demands in a more productive way? How do we bring the nutrients in? How do we begin to bring in the things that will help even the score a little bit? We've certainly need to try to reduce excess stress and demand where we can, but that's not always an option and so the only other way to balance the scorecard is to begin to look at what are the resources, who are the people who can support us, what are the time management skills we can learn, what are the ways we can restructure our physical environment to make it more enjoyable, what are the little moments of fun and delight that we can bring in and those are some of the things that we begin to talk about in this book, is how do we begin to bring those resources in to make work even though it's difficult a place, it still has meaning for us.

**Peter:** It seems to me a lot of the stress generators that you're talking about here and in my discussions with numerous people throughout this recession is a lack of communication on the leaders part about what is actually happening within the organization and that just elevates the stress even more when people don't know what's going on and if they're going to have a job next week or what's the real financial condition of the company and everything that's been going on when you see a company like Lehman Brothers just implode overnight. That has a real impact on people.

**Wendy:** Absolutely, and those stress levels can be reduced by leaders who manage some of that a little differently and understand that when people are under that kind of uncertainty and anxiety that it's very hard on people, but leaders can also have good reasons for sometimes withholding that information. Dave has some good insights I think on that.

**Peter:** Dave, I know you spend a lot of your time traveling around the world talking with CEOs, so what's the biggest challenge they're dealing with today, what are you hearing?

**David:** There's a cute French line, Peter - plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Now, if anyone speaks French, they'll recognize that's not said very well, but it's "the more it changes, the more it's the same." Leaders have to continue to win. Today we call it sustainable organizations. Yesterday, we may have called it profitable organizations but there's no question. You've got to provide a product or service that customers will pay for and then you begin to get underneath that.

Once we say okay, we've got that, you've got to create value, you've got to win in the marketplace. What is it we're worried about and the issues are I think kind of interesting, not just what I hear but the studies have shown. It's how do we win globally, not only in our market and the recently mature markets, Brazil, Russia, India, China, but the new emerging markets. How do we win globally in all of those places? How do we build better relationships with customers? How do we innovate and get much better product innovation and creativity? And then underlining of those things, kind of the center circle between global expansion, customer intimacy, and product innovation is the organization. How do we manage talent, culture, all these soft, mushy things that people say is just a bunch of soft, mushy stuff. What's interesting is the soft is hard and that's what leaders seem to be struggling with?

**Peter:** Thinking about the soft, mushy stuff, abundance is a major theme of your book and there's a circle graph in your book and think of a flower with abundant organization at the center surrounded by smaller circles with phrases like positive psychology and civility and happiness and growth, learning, and resilience and Dave and Wendy, I can think of some of the CEOs I've met looking at this and thinking this is a bunch of HR crap. Where is the circle for ROI or the one that says we're going to crush the competition, you know?

**David:** Well, if I were to sit down with a CEO... in fact, I had an interview and it was on a television show and I won't name the interviewer. It took me by surprise. I did a terrible response and he ran an investment banking firm and he said, "If I read your book right and do what you say, I can pay my people less money and they'll work harder and I'll get more money and I'll buy a bigger yacht," and I looked at him and I thought, Gordon Gekko died. I mean, that was Michael Douglas in Wall Street. I mean, you genuflected at his picture every night. There is a business reality.

In fact, we started the book with that, 'making meaning makes money.' There's a movement afoot and there are some books coming out that

shareholder value is a bad thing. What is this? I mean, if you don't deliver economic success to the marketplace and goods and services to customers, you don't deserve to live. That's the nature of this world that we live in.

Now, the question behind that is so what is it you can do to make that happen? So, if a CEO sits down and say, "So what are the two or three things most interesting to you?" "I want to dominate my market." Super. So what's the key? "I've got to have a great product." "Great, how are you going to get that..." and within two or three questions, and I call them the Because of Questions, you're back to organization and people and so if you had two hands, on the one hand is success in the markets we serve with the investors, customers and on the other hand, is meaning and motivation of your people. Those two hands have got to come together, and leaders who don't do that will find that they have great aspirations but little follow up.

Having said that, we were curious. I mean that is the premise, so how do people make sense out of meaning in your life and without a great deal of insight, Wendy and I discovered this is on a new topic. Victor Frankl did probably a foundational work that we've all heard of and many have read, man search for meaning, and in the worst of all circumstances, a concentration camp, that he says, "Who seems to survive well?" And they seem to find meaning even in the midst of despair. Then we started to say where are the disciplines that find this.

Psychology, there's a movement called Positive Psychology where people look at happiness and what's right and what's wrong. Social responsibility and demographics, the next generation, those great, young talented millennials who want meaning in their work, employee engagement literature that's so well done by the Gallup Group and some of the others, the civility literature, the team work literature where people are not just high-performing teams but high-relating teams, and Wendy and I said, "Rather than recreate a whole new theory of meaning, let's become integrators," and what you call that is a set of principles across all of these disciplines and we looked for the right word. Is it a meaningful organization? Is it a powerful organization? We picked the word abundant. Abundant is an interesting word. It implies that you have enough and more and meaning focuses on the numerator, if you will, it's not the denominator, what's on the bottom, but it's on the top. What can grow? What can expand? And when you find a abundance and have that abundance built in, we think that's going to be more successful.

What we did in this work, we said across these disciplines, what are the messages that leaders can take that will help them become meaning makers – and that's what we're focused on.

**Peter:** There is a chart in your book, well there are a lot of tables in your book. One of them is the assessment of individual abundance at work, which I think is really interesting because you go into things like identity. What am I known for? Purpose and direction: Where am I going? Teamwork: Whom

do I travel with? These are all really interesting questions and can you kind of expand on how this list got put together and how it relates to some of the other tables and the thoughts that you have in this making of an “abundant organization”?

**Wendy:** Well certainly, we’re looking at this issue of abundance from two vantage points and we also have some tables that address some of those questions at an organizational level but the principles are the same whether we’re looking at individuals or organizations. The principles are basically what gives meaning to people’s lives and as we’ve looked across a variety of literatures and the states that we weren’t really trying to create something brand new here as much as bringing together from a variety of different places, what are the different things that people turn to and say this is something that really makes my life feel meaningful. And so we try to create that table so that we can look at both at an individual level.

What gives me meaning at work? If I’m a leader at work, if I’m an employee at work, what are some of the tools that I can wield and the levers that I can pull to help me have a more meaning experience even given that I’m working harder than I ever and there’s a lot of uncertainty and I don’t really know if I’m going to still have a job in a week. What are the things that I do have, the things that I do have control over, the things that I can leverage in my own life to make meaning happen?

Then in other places in the book, we’re looking at those same tools. What can a leader do to help employees to have a more meaningful experience at work? Again, given that the leader may not be able to pay them more, may not be able to you buy them more vacation time, but can leaders still use these things to help work be a more meaningful and rewarding experience for their best employees, retain their best talent, because they’re having a positive experience. They feel like they’re skills are being used, and relationships are being developed. They’re getting the challenges that are most meaningful to them and those are valuable tools in the economy where it’s not always possible to just keep using the pay and money lever to motivate people, because we’re sort of out on that one.

**David:** I got to ask you a question Peter.

**Peter:** Sure.

**David:** You’ve been at this for a long time doing these podcasts, what keeps you excited? What gives you a sense of *{French}* What keeps you going?

**Peter:** I get to speak with really cool people like you.

**David:** That was not a setup!

**Peter:** No, but it's true, I'm a very curious person. I'm curious about a lot of different things and in doing this show, I get to speak with really interesting people who are doing great research or learning so I learn something new every day. I guess that's...

**David:** That's cool. I mean, I can relate to that and so can Wendy, and so what's fascinating is that meaning matters. By the way, money matters too, so this isn't completely gratuitous but when you do that, I don't wake up in the morning saying, "Oh my goodness, this is fun. I get paid an extra pound or dollar." It's – I get to go learn something. And that's what we said how do leaders capture that in an organization, so we're not going to deny the value of money. That's naïve and silly, it's there, but beyond it, how do you capture the hearts and minds of the people that you work with and Peter your show gets that in the correspondence we've had with you. It's not just a job. It's something that brings a sense of identity and purpose and relationship. The things we've identified into your personal life, and that's – we're intrigued and I'm not sure – and you hear hesitancy, I'm not sure we have a magic pill to do it, how do you do that in a systematic way in a company?

**Wendy:** It's fun to hear you talk about the things you've touched on three of the seven that we bring out in this book. you've talked about using your strengths, being able to use the things that you've sort of know yourself for, your identity, the things that you have used to sort of define who you are in your job. You've talked about the relationships that you build because of the works that you do that matter to you and you talked about learning and learning and resilience is one of the keys as well so just in that simple question, you begin to touch on some of the things that help people find that meaning at work in a very powerful way.

**Peter:** That's really interesting and the seven questions that drive abundance that you write about extensively in this book; have you found that there are one or two of these that particularly HR practitioners struggle with the most?

**David:** The first question we ask – and it's funny because Wendy and I even at our age, we should be preparing for a marvelous walk into the sunset in retirement, and we're not. And so the question that I think perhaps the most is identity. What is the identity you want to be known for? What are the strengths that you have that you want to use to serve other people? Because that's kind of a capturing question that integrates a lot of the others and you just said Peter, you want to be known as to your own self, on your own identity, not just publicly a learner, somebody who assimilates knowledge and grabs it and then when you can take that strength and that identity and turn it into value for others, which you do, that's where the meaning comes. A hermit is a learner, or a monk, if you will, has a different think but when you can translate that identity to others, it becomes valuable.



If I were an HR person, I would look at two different things that need to come together. One is at the company level, what is it we as a company want to be known for? Whole foods, they sell food but they do so with a positive identity. Zappos give service over the Internet with an incredible customer service identity and the chairman has written a great book about that.

**Peter:** Right, yeah. Tony Shia, I interviewed him and it's really interesting because his whole company is based on delivering just outstanding customer service and he could be selling anything.

**David:** Absolutely.

**Peter:** It's the service component that is the real secret sauce.

**David:** That's the identity of a company and an HR person can facilitate that. Do we have a clear identity? Do we know what we as a company are known for. In fact, we like to argue that your company identity should become your company's culture inside, but on the other hand, what is the identity of the people that you have working with you and do they overlap? For example, Nordstrom is a classic story, kind of the pre-Zappos story. They want the identity of service. Disney wants an identity of guest experience. There certain employees who wouldn't work well there. The guy who interviewed me who runs an investment banking firm would not probably be a good customer service employees, Zappos, Disney, or Nordstrom, and so an HR can take these two hands. What's the identity of the company and what's the identity of the person and put those together, they begin to build an organization and by the way there's a third piece of that. You got to match it with customers. Customers want that experience and so the identity insight is linked outside.

When you put those together, you have companies that are then sustainable, and that goes back to your CEO question. Where does this sustainable success come from? When we match the values and needs of the employees, their meaning with what our company is good at and with what our customers expect, so that's the one that I probably jump out.

Wendy, which of the seven might you jump on?

**Wendy:** I think one of the things that HR people are often good at is relationships but a lot of times, I don't think we realize how powerful relationships are in promoting not only people's sense of well being but their productivity. It was kind of interesting to me to realize that when people have good feelings about the relationships that work, when they have a close friend at work that that not only helps them feel better about their work but it helps them feel more satisfied with their pay, it helps reduce the absenteeism and accident rates and improved customer satisfaction and all kinds of sort of hard line bottom line things that we don't really think about

when we think about the importance of relationships that work. That that's something that not only makes life more pleasant but it actually makes the workplace more productive and more effective.

**Peter:** I think you're right; I think relationships are really important to people in HR and unfortunately, one of your previous books Dave, was called *HR Transformation*, a great book. Unfortunately the HR transformation that's taken place over the last couple of years is the disintegration of the HR teams that have been built in a lot of large organizations that have taken years to put together which have now been disbanded. So how do you go about building something back like that when it's been disbanded?

**David:** I think you start again with a basic premise that – and what is it we in HR can do that will deliver value? HR is not the end. It's a means to an end and sitting again with a CEO, who says, "I want to improve customer share. I want to improve financial or I want to improve global expansion or product innovation, we say we can give you an infrastructure that will do that and in the HR world – this is more detailed than many of readers may want – but there seems to be a bifurcation or a split.

It's kind of like finance versus accounting, sales versus marketing, information is a data warehouse versus decision making goal. Well, HR has the transaction work which is payroll, benefits, registration for training, employee compliance. There is a set of HR that is transaction work. Accounting needs to occur in company, and HR has transformational work. Good HR department have to manage both of those and they have to manage them differently, and rebuilding HR, in fact some of the people I've been talking to lately in senior HR jobs were saying, "We have lost sight of some of the HR basics." Those transactions things have to be done and done well, and the recession has pulled back some of the superfluous things and made sure we do them well. Now, coming out, we've got to go back and look at the HR transformation. How do we help deliver those business goals, the geographic expansion, customer share, and product innovation through much more thoughtful HR services.

**Peter:** You cite a number of studies in *The Why of Work* on engagement scores and I've talked to numerous people about this. In coming out of this recession and into the economic recovery, a lot of HR professionals and recruiters I've talked to at HCI and at other events I've covered this year, they're terrified of retention because they feel like their A players are just going to bail the minute there's an opportunity, are you sensing that as well?

**David:** The opportunity exists for that. In fact I think what we've gotten in some of the engagement is some false-positive, people are engaged not because they find *The Why of Work*, what we've talked about, but because they have a job, and when they compare themselves to others who don't, they're going to be happier. So I think there will be this Marshall Plan where

we say as we come through recovery, how do we learn to work with you so that we can retain our best and brightest people?

The metaphor for that and I'm going to take a minute to describe it because it just captured it for us. We didn't put it in the book because we saw it afterwards. In 2004, a television show was started called the apprentice and everybody's seen it and those are the basic assumption that they're two teams of 12 each. They go through a series of tasks. The ruler king, if you will, sits by at a lovely desk, Donald Trump in the US and decides at the end of the show that somebody is fired and then at the end of the series, one of these lucky, lucky people through their gifts and their talents and their ability to beat everybody else is hired. There is one winner. Well, that's the mindset of leadership I think in the war for talent, and there's one person left standing at the end of the game and they now get to sit behind the table and do the same thing to somebody else. What great entertainment. By the way, it's fine, it's entertaining and it's atrocious leadership. It's atrocious leadership. It's exactly what got us into the recession, leaders who isolate themselves, who act with arrogance, who have hubris, not humility, who looked for the one great winner and stop.

Now, the other anecdote to that is a show that came out recently called the Undercover Boss. In this show, the boss goes undercover. He dresses as an employee. He learns what the employees are experiencing on their frontline. He wants to find out what gives employees in my shop meaning.

At an amusement park ride, he finds an amusement park boat guide having a delight at having telling stories to the children. He finds a woman selling coffee, having relationships and joy with the people she meets, and she sells 2500 cups of coffee a day. At the end of the Undercover Boss, the boss comes back after a week of discovery, stands up in front of 500 employees and says, we will change the way we work so that everybody finds the meaning they need.

At The Apprentice, there's one winner and everybody else loses. In the Undercover Boss, there is 500 winners. That's not only good entertainment, it's good leadership, and that's what we're trying to capture in this book.

**Peter:** What did you learn in writing *The Why of Work* and what's surprised you in doing the research?

**Wendy:** One of the things that we learned is that writing a book together is an interesting prospect for a marriage.

**Peter:** Yeah, how does that work on your marriage?

**Wendy:** Yeah, we certainly had some great moments together and we had some interesting conversations where we were debating some of these issues and pushing each other on what we understood about what we were trying to

do. We have very different writing styles and trying to figure out how to meld some of that together and all of those things.

One of the things I learned is simply as we've talked about already today, the value of that kind of collaboration. How much more we learn when we are engaged with people who are different from us as well as people whom we love and respect, and the value is not only in having a better product but that we have a richer experience and I think that becomes sort of a microcosm for the very point we're trying to make, that as we come together as we build each others strengths as we empower each other, as we work together, we're not only going to have a better experience at work but we're going to have a better company, we're going to be more profitable, we're going to be more successful.

**Peter:** Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to share with the audience about your research or your book?

**David:** I'll make one comment and you captured it very nicely, and it's four words, "making meaning makes money." This is not a book about Kumbaya, it's not – another reviewer said, "This is human relations from the 1930s." Wrong. Human relations in the 1930s was about what happened inside the company, not what happened inside the company so that we succeed outside, so that conversation that you raise with the CEO is so critical. Yes, we will win and we will win in the right way.

**Wendy:** The other comment that comes back to me often is the idea that a crisis is a terrible thing to waste. We've had a crisis in many companies and if everybody just decides, "Okay, as soon as this is over, I'm fleeing to another place. We're going have a great, big, huge game of musical chairs but we're not going to necessarily end up with a company that's any better than the one we left, but if we can all kind of work together to build the companies that we have and to build within the organizations that we have a more meaningful and rich experience for everyone, everybody comes out a winner and that crisis will not have just been wasted with a lot of failures and a lot of frustration and a lot of angst but it will become something that we can learn from that we can grow from and that we can become better people and a better society as a result.

**Peter:** Dave and Wendy, thank you very much for taking time to speak with us today on TotalPicture Radio. This has really been enjoyable.

**Wendy:** It's been a delight to be with you Peter. Thanks for great questions and fun conversation.

**David:** Likewise. Thanks so much.

**Peter:** Thank you.

**Close:** We'd like to thank Taleo for sponsoring our podcast with Dave and Wendy Ulrich, authors of *The Why of Work* published by McGraw-Hill. We welcome your participation in the conversation. Visit Dave and Wendy's feature page in the Leadership Channel of TotalPicture Radio. That's [TotalPicture.com](http://TotalPicture.com) to voice your opinion and read about the seven questions that drive abundance we've been discussing. You'll also find additional resources and a complete transcript of our interview.

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