



Why I left a flourishing career for a leadership role at Microsoft

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In 2015 when I told many of my mentors and industry sponsors that I was thinking about taking a transformational leadership position at Microsoft, the typical reaction was a little grimace and then the repeated directive: “Megan, don’t do it.”

I received all sorts of feedback about how, at 33 years old, my rapidly accelerated career would stall, the leadership brand I had worked hard to build would tarnish, my innovative edge would be stifled, I would be put into a corporate box, and my professional drive would flicker out.

Those who knew me personally knew of my strong Minnesota-based personal support network and advised me against leaving that for the well-known “Seattle Freeze.”

Besides, my career was off to a fantastic start. I’d spent the last decade designing and leading scaled global sales organizations for a public enterprise software company and a large, rapidly growing New York B2B tech firm. I had opportunities to lead numerous business acquisition integrations along the way. I’d done it my way, on an uncharted path, with many failures (ahem, “lessons”), and reaped the benefits that come with being a high-performing leader in the tech industry.

What was at stake?

I was in a good place. A place of rapid growth as well as stability for my young family. Things were buzzing along. Plus, my husband Nick, my children, and I had a comfortable life near an amazing support system of family and friends.

Did we really want to leave that?

I chewed on the Microsoft opportunity for quite a long time—almost a year. During that time, I’m certain Microsoft also considered whether I was the right person to lead in its evolving culture. Nick and I often discussed what this role at Microsoft would mean for our family of five. If we relocated to Seattle, he would be giving up his career to become a “Parental Engineer” so that I could focus on mine.

Was I being selfish? Was it the best thing for our children? They were eight, six, and two at the time.

I spent many sleepless nights thinking about my belief that to move the needle in female leadership representation, more women need to take calculated risks when their careers get too comfortable. It’s something I had spoken about at conferences, always lived up to, and executed on.

Across those months, Nick and I became more aligned than ever that I needed to not only believe in taking calculated risks, but step up and continue to be a living example for women, including our two young girls. I felt that leaving my flourishing career for a somewhat unknown path did not mean slowing my growth or limiting my potential. It meant I would cultivate my leadership capabilities in ways I could not begin to imagine.

Trusting my spirit

My behavioral pattern has been that once I get a team or a program up and running, optimized, and scaled globally, I like to look for more responsibilities—big ones. It’s scary, but it’s also the same thrill that drew me into technology in 2005. So, when the opportunity with Microsoft came up, I was intrigued and open for a conversation.

A big reason was because of how Satya Nadella wanted to change the culture of the company. Being part of this type of large-scale change drew me in on a human level—emotionally and intellectually. The opportunity I had in front of me was more than a business build. It was the bringing together of both my professional and personal passion into a single mission.

In June 2015, Satya sent out what has become a famous internal email, his “vision memo.” He wrote about the company’s new mission (“to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more”); the need to transition into a mobile-first, cloud-first company; and the company’s new strategy and ambition.

That was powerful, but his comments on culture were what spoke to me on a different level. He talked about creating a work environment of inclusion, empathy, and curiosity. It was right then that I paused, closed my eyes, and took a breath. Deep inside my spirit, I knew at that very moment Microsoft was the place for me.

A month later, I entered the world of Microsoft as General Manager of Sales Innovation.

Living and working with a unified purpose

Now, more than two years in, I can’t imagine this stage of my career at any place other than Microsoft. For the very first time, I feel a profound sense of purpose that goes beyond my day-to-day business objectives. It is deeply connected to my personal life and my personal mission.

I’ve had the opportunity to combine innovation with strong personalized leadership and culture-building on one of the biggest stages. I’ve also begun to tackle some of the challenges that are close to my heart—and to the success of the company—including:

- Figuring out just what it means to live and lead with a growth mindset.
- Inspiring boundless innovation for reshaping customer and employee experiences.
- Encouraging women in leadership, technology, and sales careers.
- Creating a strong team full of diverse thought anchored in inclusion for all.
- Building new customer and partner engagement models within a global digital sales team.
- Welcoming millennials into an organization they’ve always dreamed of working for.
- Bringing empathy into all aspects of work and life.

I’m going to write about these topics and more in the coming months. Meantime, I get to live them every day with lots of curiosity and encouragement from those mentors and sponsors who were sure I would be sitting in a corporate box, without any drive or innovation running through my veins.

– Megan

Know individuals who are thinking about making a bold career move? Feel free to share my story with them—and theirs with me! Leave me a comment below or reach out on Twitter: [@megandahleno](#).

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One of the most common questions I get asked is why I chose a career at Microsoft. This article explains.

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