Economy of Communion Project

Interview with Nick Sanna | December 18, 2025

Nick Sanna is a high-tech entrepreneur who has been the chief executive of a succession of venture-backed software companies over thirty years, most recently as president of SAFE, which measures cybersecurity risk in financial terms, and as founder of the FAIR Institute, a non-profit community of 18,000 practitioners built around an open standard his companies gave away. Born in Italy and raised in Austria, Romania and Tunisia by a diplomat father, he studied economics in Rome, met the Focolare movement as a teenager, and encountered the Economy of Communion (EoC) on the day it was announced, at a point when, as he puts it, he hated business people. His parents disinherited him over it. He has never owned a company outright, and the interview is largely an argument that this made the EoC easier to live rather than harder: every decision had to be won as a matter of unity with investors, partners and co-owners. Recorded over two days, it covers all of that, the companies, the employees he kept on the payroll through illness and addiction, the seven-figure job he turned down, and the morning habit underneath it.

This transcript is arranged by subject rather than in the order of the recording. Nick Sanna's words are unchanged. The interviewer's questions have been shortened in places. After its first appearance in each part, the Economy of Communion is abbreviated to EoC.

Part One: Introduction

Interviewer: Can you tell us your name, what your company does, and who your clients are?

Nick Sanna: My name is Nick Sanna. I'm a high-tech serial entrepreneur. I'm the president of a software company called SAFE, and I'm the founder of the FAIR Institute.

SAFE is a company that helps large organizations assess cybersecurity from a business perspective, in financial terms, so they can prioritize what matters in terms of remediation, and automate the entire process of assessing and remediating risk.

The FAIR Institute is a community of practitioners that develops standard models to define and assess cybersecurity risk, and provides educational opportunities to learn about the standards, and networking opportunities among the members.

The problems we help to fix are answering questions like, "How much risk do we have, in dollars and cents?" Not as an abstract technical issue, but what's the impact on the bottom line: of a hacker taking our data and exposing us, or of ransomware breaking down our supply chain or stopping our production from happening. So we help them assess the severity and the likelihood of those events, and then also recommend remediation options: what are the controls that are most effective in addressing those problems?

Our clients are worldwide, and they're well-known names. They go from companies like Netflix to Honeywell to Caterpillar, to some of the biggest banks in the world, to BT, and Telstra in Australia. So we are fortunate to have customers worldwide.

Part Two: Growing up, and finding the Economy of Communion

A childhood without a country

Interviewer: Could you give a little more of your own story? Maybe start with the priest who baptized you, and the visit your parents made to him.

Nick Sanna: One thing I can share is that I always had a longing for relationships, but I always found myself in situations where those relationships would be cut short or broken.

My father was in the foreign service for Italy, so we used to go from country to country every few years, which meant changing country, language, schools, friends. Every time you built a relationship, it was gone.

But the thing I suffered from most was that in many countries I never really felt I belonged, because I was different. In Austria, because I was Italian and not Austrian. In Romania, because we were capitalists and not communists. In Tunisia, because we were Christians and not Muslims. There was always a separation.

There's one moment I remember as an image. We were in Romania, a communist country, and as Westerners we were confined to compounds. We were in this country club for Westerners only. My dad was playing golf, and I was sitting there sipping a Coke. And I saw this Romanian kid at the fence, looking at me, badly clothed, dirty, hungry, looking at us.

And I thought, this is not right. I was probably ten years old. That image stayed with me forever. What is this? We're in a world where he and I should be playing together, sharing with one another, and we're not allowed to mingle. These are humanly made notions: politicians telling us who our enemies are. We should be connecting with one another. Instead of living as brothers and sisters, we're living as enemies. And in each country, that same notion followed. Something was always telling you that you were different.

So for me, encountering a community like the Focolare, which said we're all brothers and sisters, basically a Christian ideal, nothing original, but they were actually taking it very seriously and living it: I found that you have value in yourself, and that the experience of the other can be an enrichment. We can share our culture, our experience and our traditions with one another as a positive thing.

For me it was like, oh my God, I've been looking for this all my life. When I met the Focolare, I thought, this is my home. The Focolare is also very open in dialogue with people of no faith, of different religions, from different countries. And we were equals.

To the point where even the notion of nationality is very relative for me, because we are one humanity. That's more important to me. Yes, I love my original country, Italy, but I'm an American now, and I love America too. So when we speak ill of one another, it doesn't make any sense. We have so much we can appreciate in one another, and love one another, and live like brother and sister. Loving your country doesn't mean hating another country.

As a kid I witnessed a lot of separations (political, religious, cultural), and they didn't make any sense. So this encounter, with this girl who was part of the Focolare and then with her friends in the community, and seeing how they treated one another, was really life-changing for me. This is my home and my community.

And then, when my parents disinherited me, they looked for the only person they trusted in the church: the religious brother who had baptized me in Vienna, Austria.

Apparently, when I was a kid, there was a lively community in Vienna around this church that my parents were part of, and this was the only religious person they ever really trusted in their lives. They had never had such an experience; he was very open, he put people together.

So when they felt I was having this mystical crisis, giving things away and sharing with others, they thought he would probably talk me out of it and reason with me.

I remember my parents came to Rome from abroad, and we had this trip to the Vatican, where this man was stationed. I felt like I was going to the Inquisition. This was going to be the end of it.

We met this friar: his name was Padre Giuliani, which I didn't remember, since I'd been a baby. And my mother, just after greeting him (and they hadn't seen him in more than 10 years) told him, "We have a big problem."

And he said, "Really? What is it? What's going on?"

"Nick is hanging out with this group of people from the Focolare, and he's helping so many people, giving things away, and we're very concerned he's going to get lost."

And he said, "Really?"

And I thought, that's going to be the end of it.

And then he comes to me, opens his arms, hugs me, and says, "You know, I met Chiara. She was a student in my school, and she became a teacher in the school where I taught in Trent, in the 1930s and 40s."

I think my mom was about to faint.

And he went on recounting how he had helped the Focolare community develop in Austria, how people smuggled others across to spread that idea in the Eastern European countries during communism, and how he tried to build a loving, living community in the church where he was stationed.

So the sentiment coming back was the opposite of what my parents expected. I was thinking, yes, thank you, God. My parents were very silent, for different reasons.

Only years later did they realize that what I was experiencing was actually a good thing, and they became sympathizers. When they saw how we grew our family and how we brought up our kids, they felt it had been a positive experience in the end.

Interviewer: I didn't know you'd had experiences in communist countries as a child. Which communist countries?

Nick Sanna: Romania. During the Ceaușescu years. Very, very rough. Talking about disunity: it was disunity by design.

The hammer and the anvil

Interviewer: Can you say more about that question, whether you want to be the hammer or the anvil?

Nick Sanna: This was not my dad's question; it was the statement of a friend of his who was an entrepreneur. I was in what they thought was a mystical crisis; for me it was just a conversion, a strong conversion in my life.

And he was trying to convince me. Look at me: I have a lot of money, I have a lot of things, I have a lot of power. And you need to decide where you want to be: like me. Those losers who work for me, they don't make as much money, they don't have a say in things.

It was a motivational speech that turned me completely off, and I decided I never want to be like you. So that's a bit more depth on that statement.

Interviewer: And what was it again?

Nick Sanna: "You need to decide whether you want to be the hammer or the anvil." That's how he sees life. And I thought, no, I want to see life as brothers and sisters. You can live in the world of anvils and hammers; I'm going to live on a different planet.

Why I hated business people

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little about your story? What brought you to where you are now?

Nick Sanna: What brought me here is actually something counterintuitive: I hated business people. I was, I think, a depressed college student. I studied economics and business, and I was probably exposed to bad models of entrepreneurship. I once had a buddy of my dad come to our home and tell me that in life you needed to be the hammer or the anvil, and I needed to pick which one I wanted to be. And I hated that model. And yet here I am, 30 years later, a businessman. So that's a long circle to get here.

Interviewer: What was it that first moved you, or drew you to the EoC when you first heard about it?

Nick Sanna: I studied economics and trade, but almost by default. I didn't know what I wanted to do: I was an immature young student at 18, I didn't know what to do, and by exclusion I chose economics and trade. But over the years I developed a passion to help others. I wanted to save the world, and I studied international development.

But the more I studied international development, the more I realized the return on investment was very bad. We were basically giving money away for charitable initiatives, and most of those initiatives were ending up in the pockets of governments that were pocketing the aid money, or creating a situation of dependency, where people, instead of lifting themselves up, became accustomed to subsidies.

So I was feeling very disenchanted by all the efforts that were being made in economic development. That's why I was depressed. I was graduating, and there was an avenue that didn't provide real solutions. And the business world: I hated business people, because I felt they were full of greed and not really solving problems. They were just selfish people. So I had nowhere to go. What am I going to do next?

And when I met the Economy of Communion (EoC) and discovered businesses that are geared to do good and to be at the service of others, for me it was like, oh my God, this might be my calling. Within one or two days, I realized: this is my calling. I'm going to do this, and find a purpose.

The first encounter, and what it cost

Interviewer: Can you tell the story of how you first got connected to the EoC?

Nick Sanna: The first time I was connected to the EoC was in 1991. I had graduated from college in Rome, and I was part of a youth organization of a movement called the Focolare movement.

This movement had practiced what they called the communion of goods, where people tried to put some of their goods in common (especially goods they don't need) for the benefit of the community. And they realized that there was a possibility to scale this at the business level as well: to have businesses animated by the same spirit of giving, the same culture of giving; to help the communities around them by providing employment opportunities, by helping the poor in their community, by changing the way they treated their customers and their employees, treating them like family and as true partners in the business, as a true community.

For me that was a life-changing moment. To the point where I remember I went home and I was so struck that I took my pile of clothing (I had my pullovers, I had cameras; my family was pretty well off), and I was giving things away, because I was so enthusiastic about this new experience, that my parents got really scared. To the point where they disinherited me a few months later, because they were afraid I was giving everything of the family's away. That's a long story, but it was a big testing moment for me as well.

Interviewer: We have to hear that story sometime. They really disinherited you?

Nick Sanna: They thought I was in a mystical crisis. For me it was a big conversion, a life conversion, and they felt I had lost my mind and that I would probably end up living like a homeless person.

Many years later, we reconciled. They came and visited us, and they looked at us and said, "You have a car? You have a nice home? You have a nice job? Do you still live the same spirit of communion?" Yes, we still do it. But we don't do it as a sacrifice of our family and the upbringing of our kids. And they

were like, hmm. It's a story that continued and got them to turn around over the years and realize that doing good by others was not a limitation on being good to you and your family.

Interviewer: How old were you when that first happened?

Nick Sanna: When they disinherited me, I was 23 or 24. Big test. We were estranged for a few years.

Falling in love with a lifestyle

Interviewer: Do you feel connected to the Focolare movement? What has it meant for you in your life?

Nick Sanna: I feel connected, because for me the Focolare movement was a way to discover a different way of living.

To tell you the story of how I met the Focolare movement: I fell in love with a girl who was part of it. I was attracted by her luminosity. She was a shining person. I felt she had superpowers: she could remember everybody's birthday, she always had a thought for this person or that one, she always found a way to help somebody, she remembered people's needs. She was a community builder at school, and I thought, she's amazing, I want to be like her.

So we dated for a year, and then I realized that I was in love not necessarily with her but with her lifestyle. I realized that when I met her friends, and her friends were like her. And it was like, there's something going on here. These people live like a community of brothers and sisters. They're willing to give everything to one another, almost to die for one another. And you go, oh my God, I want to live that way.

It was tough, because at some point I had to tell her that I was in love with her lifestyle and not with her. But that was life. That was my connection. And so I embraced that lifestyle, which for me was a big life conversion as well.

What the Focolare is

Interviewer: Could you give a brief overview of what the Focolare is?

Nick Sanna: The Focolare is an international movement that was born within the Catholic Church during World War II, and whose motto is "May they all be one." It works to help create unity among people (within the church, among churches, and with people of different religions and of no belief), so that we can all live as one people, like brothers and sisters, despite our differences.

Interviewer: Are you a member? What's your relationship now with the Focolare?

Nick Sanna: I'm a member of the Focolare movement, yes. What does that mean? It means living the lifestyle of communion, where you're trying to put loving others as yourself at the forefront of your life, as the main principle of your life, and building up one another to the point where you can create the presence of Jesus in the midst, among the two of us.

In the gospel of Matthew it says that where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them. Love one another to the point where you can feel His presence. There's a loving presence where you feel like you're not living for yourself anymore, but you're living for others, a spirit that doesn't put you first,

giving you a strength and a generosity that you would never be capable of on your own, that comes from God. That was my discovery in meeting the members of the Focolare movement. And living that spirit is what makes me a member of the movement.

Interviewer: So Loretta is a focolarina and Paul is a focolarino, but they're unmarried. What's the nature of your connection? What are you?

Nick Sanna: I'm a married focolarino, so I'm a member equal to them, except I have a family, and I live with them and like them, also in terms of commitments.

You mentioned these two members who are single members of the Focolare movement. They make vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. You don't make vows in that sense as a married person, but you can make promises of living poverty, chastity and obedience.

For me, from the poverty perspective, it means living, as it pertains to my own needs, with only what I need, and being detached from everything else, without letting my family suffer in the process, of course. And all the other promises mean making everything in my relationships with others, including with my spouse and other people, out of pure love and not out of self-interest. That's my commitment in all those things. And I'm trying to live it the best way I can as a married person.

Interviewer: Are you a volunteer?

Nick Sanna: I'm a married focolarino.

Interviewer: What's a volunteer, then? Because that's what Joan is.

Nick Sanna: Volunteers don't make those strong commitments to God and to the Church, those promises of poverty, obedience and chastity. They make a commitment to living the lifestyle without that service to the Work of Mary, the Focolare movement. They try to live in society as workers, as family members, without that tightness of commitment to the work of the Focolare.

Interviewer: Do you have a community in Virginia of focolarini? And do you have one in New York?

Nick Sanna: I belong to a Focolare house where we meet on a regular basis. Some people live there permanently as consecrated men. I'm associated with the Focolare and go there as regularly as I can. In partaking of their lives, they enrich me by their commitment to this lifestyle. I also hope I can enrich them with my experience of applying the lifestyle in my family life and my professional life as well.

The Focolare and the Economy of Communion

Interviewer: How has the spirit of the Focolare shaped the way you practice the EoC?

Nick Sanna: I think the lifestyle of the Focolare, which fosters a culture of giving, is the same as the EoC. Except that before, there was no understanding in the Focolare movement that you could apply the same principle in the business world. You applied it in all the other facets of your life, but business people had to be heroes in their own way. You couldn't create a system where you could turn a business into a force for good. But it's the same spirit. So for me it had a very unifying effect.

What living the spirit of the EoC in business did for me was very unifying, because what I see in business all the time is this split personality. You are a certain person at home, with your friends, and you might be a slightly different person at work, because you have different obligations. Whereas living a culture of giving throughout all these dimensions, you are unified. You can be the same person at home, with your friends, with your colleagues, with your investors, with the community, and there's no dichotomy. There's no split personality.

For me that was very liberating. At the beginning of my experience in business, I was not there yet. I still felt I needed a role, and I was trying to mimic what other people were doing. And that's rubbish. I've got to be true to what this culture is. You can live it fully, and if there are consequences, there's still no better way than living this way.

Interviewer: I'm actually more involved now than I was when I was an accountant at the school in Chicago and in California. I'm more involved.

Nick Sanna: I think this is a reflection of the fact that, maybe even in the Focolare, there's a perception of a divided life, which happens in society. We are one person in our personal lives and a different person in our business life. And maybe there's some of that in the Focolare as well, where we may be intimidated about showing our two colors at work, for whatever reason. Or maybe we're intimidated because we don't know how to apply the culture-of-giving principles to the business world. So maybe I'm still over-identifying with certain roles that society is pushing on us, and maybe I don't know how to handle it. I think there's a bit of both. And I think the work you're doing with this initiative is very helpful in being the antidote to that.

Interviewer: If we could convert all the focolarini to the EoC as well, that would be great, multiplying the effect. That's our hope.

Nick Sanna: By the way, the EoC is not just for the Focolare. I used to live in France, and in France the majority of the EoC are non-members of the Focolare. Some of them are not Christian, some of them are not believers, but they espouse the same principle: the culture of giving. It speaks to them, it's their lifestyle, and the EoC is an expression for living it out. It gives them a platform for living it as a community.

Part Three: A career in business

Paris, and then America

Interviewer: What positions have you held over the last 30 years, and what companies have you worked with?

Nick Sanna: To begin with: I hated business people, so how do you become an entrepreneur? I was fortunate enough that in '91, when I graduated, I was exposed to this experience of the Economy of Communion, which was something totally new. It blew my mind. I was exposed to this model where entrepreneurs were using their businesses to do good in society, running their businesses as a way of

being good to others, through their services, and through the way they were treating their employees and the community around them. For me it was a revolutionary moment. It changed my outlook completely: that you can do business for doing good, and maybe I can have a role to play there.

I remember my first job was in Paris, France, in an American software company. They gave me a role for which I was underqualified, but they gave me a chance. That's what I like about American entrepreneurship: it gives you a lot of chances. And I discovered I was good at selling and marketing products, but in a way that was, I think, highly ethical. I was good at being honest about identifying the problems we were facing, matching them with the solution you had, and equally as comfortable disqualifying opportunities where we might not be a fit, where maybe we had to recommend another company that was a better fit for that problem.

So I discovered that being a solution provider was a highly ethical and beneficial way to work, especially if you are representing products that nobody else has figured out before. If you are uniquely solving a problem through research and ingenuity, that's hard to come by.

That was the beginning. And from there: oh my God, I can make a career out of helping people, finding solutions to problems that can improve the destiny of their companies and their own personal trajectories. I discovered I was good at it, because I had learned, also through the experience of the community, to be a good listener, to sympathize with people's problems, and to try to be good to them and serve them in the best way I could.

Interviewer: So you were in France for how long? And then what happened next?

Nick Sanna: I was in France for six years, and we ended up being quite successful. They asked me to become the general manager of the entire company, and worldwide operations happened to be headquartered in the States, so my wife and I moved to the States for three years. Those three years became 30 years.

What I discovered in America is an environment that was very open to entrepreneurship, to people who want to serve needs that are unmet. I discovered that I could find a career in identifying problems that were previously seen as unsolvable, finding solutions that could meet those needs, and partnering with technical founders who struggled to match those needs, acting as connective tissue between a need that was unmet in the industry and technical providers who had an original solution in search of a problem to solve. I could be the glue between the two.

And in America, I found people who, without knowing me, said, "Great idea. There's an opportunity there. How much money do you need? Do you have a business plan?" They gave me money without knowing me, and I made a career out of it.

The companies

Interviewer: What was the first company you started?

Nick Sanna: The first company I started was in cybersecurity, and it tried to deal with the problem of signal-to-noise. In technical terms, what that means is that in cybersecurity you're often trying to detect signals of bad behavior or a bad state of affairs, from a control and security perspective, and

you're trying to surface what matters most to the business. The company was called e-Security, and it ended up being sold to a company called Novell many years later. What I learned is that this was a country that really incentivized ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

Interviewer: So you started that company and then you sold it. And then what did you do?

Nick Sanna: Then I started a new company. Investors found me and told me, "Hey, we want to start another company. We found this business idea. Are you willing to develop it?" And they gave me carte blanche: "You can place this company wherever you want, you can hire who you want."

And I told them yes, but I want to build this company based on certain principles, which were the EoC principles. I told them what it was about. They thought it was a good idea, and as long as it didn't prevent the company from flourishing, they gave me carte blanche.

Interviewer: What was the name of that one?

Nick Sanna: The company was called Netuitive. I did that one for over 10 years.

Interviewer: How long have you been a CEO?

Nick Sanna: Twenty-five years.

Interviewer: Could you say briefly what the companies are that you have worked at, and what you do now?

Nick Sanna: I've been fortunate to be leading high-tech companies a few times in a row, in various roles, namely as CEO for three companies. One was called e-Security, in the 2000s. Then another company called Netuitive. And then another company called RiskLens, which was acquired two years ago, and we merged with another company, which gave birth to the company called SAFE right now.

As a high-tech entrepreneur, what we do is find a problem that has not been solved yet in the industry. We put the researchers and the product people and the marketers together, and try to find a unique solution to match that need. That concept turns into a product or a service that meets customers' needs. You perfect the product, it turns into new business practices that serve previously unmet needs, and it develops into a real business.

The vocation of these businesses is often to integrate with larger businesses, so you can spread this novelty, this innovation, to the widest distribution channels possible. In most cases, these companies get acquired and integrated into larger companies, or sometimes they become the large company. What we're trying to do now at SAFE is to become a large company that can consolidate the space with a new way of thinking about cybersecurity.

My role

Interviewer: What has generally been your primary role in these different companies you've been involved in?

Nick Sanna: I was the CEO. In all the companies I managed in the last 30 years, I was the CEO. I was working for venture capitalists who invested money in the company and took a majority position, and I was running the business to provide good returns, but also with my intent to solve an original problem that would advance a profession, and address problems that would help humanity as well. For the most part, that meant helping people and organizations go about their business in a safe way. As we engage in digital processes, digital transactions, how do you make sure that that's secure and safe for you and your company and your family?

Interviewer: What do you love most about your role?

Nick Sanna: I was fortunate to enjoy a lot of freedom. A lot of the investors I met trusted me, for whatever reason, which is a big responsibility. I think they trusted that I had the best interest of customers at heart, that we wanted to solve a problem nobody else had solved before, and that I had the courage to go into the unknown, and then to engage people who could solve the problem in a highly efficient and innovative way, and who also had the right motives at heart. I was truthful to them, I was truthful to the customer, and good to them in a deep sense. So there was also a commonality with the investors I had all along, in terms of motives and the ethics of running a business.

Interviewer: You're not a sole owner. Have you ever been a sole owner?

Nick Sanna: No, I've always had partners.

Interviewer: You've always been a part owner, as part of your compensation. Can you explain that?

Nick Sanna: As part of being a high-tech entrepreneur, one principle is to partner with other people in the industry. Because it takes a village to really break through difficult problems, and it takes people with different skills. So typically you have a combination of multiple shareholders around the table: people who have technical skills, people who have business skills, but also people who come up with capital, who are financial contributors to the venture. And all of us need to work together.

And on the employee side, we made sure that in every company I led, everybody was a shareholder, so that they had a real buy-in to the mission. They were really protagonists. They were not just employees being told what to do; they actually had a say in how we did things, and a core responsibility.

Interviewer: Can you talk about the incentives of ownership, and the role they play in the way the EoC does business?

Nick Sanna: I don't work in a full-time EoC business, but there are principles we abide by, like the principle that every employee is a shareholder. I hope that many EoC businesses work that way.

Because if you want to create an environment where everybody can bring their own contribution, and it's valued, and they feel like they are protagonists, then there should also be benefits. They should not only have the responsibility to speak up and contribute, but also reap the benefits of their contributions. So whether it's profit sharing or being a shareholder, the organizational impact must be there. Otherwise, acting as a band of brothers and sisters, like a family, isn't true: it isn't reflected in the organizational structure.

Selling

Interviewer: Is it typical for you to go out and do marketing like you did today, to try to make a sale and get a new customer?

Nick Sanna: Yes, I do this a lot, because when you do innovation, you sell by teaching things that people thought were not possible. When you disrupt a belief, a status quo, you need to show them a vision for how things can be better, and why. That requires you to meet and engage and educate them. So most of my selling over the years has been educating, more than just selling a product people already knew they had a need for. Most of my businesses were about solving a need that was unmet. They didn't know it could be solved, and we had an original and new way of solving it.

Interviewer: Not many CEOs go out and do that all the time. It seems unusual.

Nick Sanna: Well, it's a matter of leadership. I subscribe to two main principles. In the U.S., I think you are a natural servant leader; but also, as an innovation company, you need to lead from the front. To understand the customers' problems, you need to build a deep relationship, get under the skin, understand what they're going through professionally and personally, and see in what ways you can meet their needs.

And I would add one thing: you cannot delegate it. Have partners sell for you, have salespeople do it for you: yes, they can help. But if you don't have direct touch with what the customers are feeling, it's tough to have ideas spark, especially in innovation companies. Ideas come from engaging and building a deep relationship with the customers.

Interviewer: A lot of your experience, and a lot of your success, comes from that sales background.

Nick Sanna: I think my specialty has been more on the sales and marketing side. I grew up through those ranks because I found that being a matchmaker between needs and solutions was something I was good at. And I liked it. I liked the discovery process.

So I try to teach my team members that we're not in the selling business, we're in the solutioning business. And it's very different. Sales can be very self-centered: you're focusing on the wrong things, on making a buck, on trying to convince people to close a deal. Whereas solutioning is about understanding the need, and understanding how best to fulfill it. It's all about the customer, not about yourself.

That's something I remind people of very often, because it's very easy to fall into the trap of, okay, it's all about the forecast. Yeah, I go through that too, but in the end we're in the solutioning business. We're not just in the sales business.

Interviewer: How have you grown as a salesman, or should I say a solution man?

Nick Sanna: Over the years I've grown more comfortable with accepting my failures quicker, and starting again quicker. Because as a young individual you have big aspirations and you aspire to perfection, and you often find yourself not always on top of your game. I've found myself becoming much quicker to accept my failures, which also means much quicker to stand up again.

And I would say I'm much more comfortable now with challenging a situation for the right reasons. As a younger person, you have that tendency to want to fit in, to want to be appreciated. Now my appreciation for who I am is not so dependent on the judgment of other people. We are sons and daughters of God, and our dignity comes from that, and our patience comes from that, and what I do for humanity is what defines me. The rest doesn't define me as much. As I've gotten older, the outlook of other people and how society views things has become less important to me.

Interviewer: What would you say is the single most important tip or trick to making a sale?

Nick Sanna: Making a sale is when somebody says, "This is a solution, I'm going to go for it." Closing is then a procurement cycle.

In terms of making a sale, there's not a trick. It's a process. It's the realization of what need a person has, helping them translate it, and helping them understand the negative consequences of that need. Because the need may be latent: there was no solution for this thing, and they may actually be okay living with it for a while longer. But when they understand the consequences of it, they may realize, oh my God, I should be doing something about it. I shouldn't be living with it. And then being able to portray a solution in terms of a better future state, resolving things, with positive business consequences and positive personal consequences. Being able to clarify that picture does wonders for people's understanding of why they should be doing this.

It's a value-based discussion. It's not about a product. I didn't talk about product. I talked about their current state, the negative consequences of the current state they're in, and then: "Oh, you're helping me conceptualize the problems I'm facing better than I could myself." And then you help them paint a vision and come up with an aspiration for where they should be, and talk about what that would do for them and their business. Helping them articulate that is very powerful.

Then you go into the discussion of what the requirements are to do this, and then you get into solutioning. But by then you understand the customer deeply, and they can rationalize why they should be doing something. Then having a solution that does it makes it obvious. "Oh, you have a solution that can get me from here to here, and does these things. The rationale for what we should do is obvious." And they can articulate it to themselves, to their peers, to their business.

That clarity is, I think, the most powerful thing I learned in my career.

Interviewer: Marketing is good at framing a problem, but then comes the over-promising: "I have a solution to that." What makes the difference, so the customer knows it is not you imposing your solution on them?

Nick Sanna: The antidote to that, in my experience, is that first they need to discover it.

I'm going to use an example outside business. I came to the States in the year 2000, and I went to the doctor and met this young doctor. He asked me three questions and prescribed something. And I went home and thought, I'm not taking this drug. He knows nothing about me.

I went to another doctor, a 65-year-old, and he spent half an hour quizzing me about my symptoms, running some tests, asking about my family health history. And then he explained to me how he was coming to his diagnosis, and prescribed a remedy for it. And I thought, okay, which doctor do I want to keep visiting?

Same thing in business. Do you want to work with a company that takes care to understand the depth of your needs, or do you want to work with a company that's superficial, that just wants to place a product with at most a couple of questions asked, and we'll worry later about whether it's a fit or not?

So it starts with deep discovery about the needs the company or person faces. And second, having clear rules about what the fit is. Once you understand where they want to go and what the requirements are that would satisfy their need, what we call the metrics in our company: what are the metrics we need to achieve, how high do we need to jump to make sure you say you're satisfied?

Making that explicit and clear beforehand, and being tested against it before you engage in business, is key. It's the antidote to feeling like you're dumping a product on somebody and it becomes shelfware. So: deep discovery, clear setting of expectations, and testing before you actually consume, to see whether we meet the criteria or not.

Living it without owning the business

Interviewer: The EoC isn't only for people who own their business, and you are a good example. As someone who doesn't own the company, how do you bring EoC values in and let them drive the business?

Nick Sanna: This was the question at the beginning: how can I live the EoC without owning a business? Especially in the game I was playing, where I realized that to solve a problem I needed friends: in some cases friends with talent, my technical partners, and in some cases friends with money, who had capital to fund innovation. Because when you want to defy gravity and solve a problem that hasn't been met before, you need to put researchers, developers, scientists and academia together to tackle it in ways I couldn't do alone.

So instead of trying to build it myself, and build a small idea, and take a long time and maybe not solve the problem, I realized that I had to put a community together to solve these original problems, which also meant not owning the business completely, and having business partners. In most of the businesses, nobody had an outright majority, which forced us to get along. Because either we get along or we get nothing done.

So it was a game of unity. Can we get to an agreement on what the right strategy is for the company, the right way of running the business, the right objectives for the business? And as long as I was able to play this game and apply the EoC principles, because I made it very clear with investors what game we wanted to play, what the principles and behaviors and codes of conduct were that we wanted to apply to running our businesses.

Interviewer: So in not owning your own business, and having partners who have a lot of say over what you do, you actually have more opportunity to live out EoC values, because you have to build the unity.

Nick Sanna: Yes. But I think at the beginning, when you tell these stories, people think it's a nice story, and they may not take you seriously. I think when the rubber meets the road, when tough decisions have to be made that cost money, that's the real test. Are they really your partners? Are they really with you in living out those values and the consequences of living a certain way and making business decisions a certain way? And so we had a few of those over the years.

Interviewer: Do you want to share one now, or do you want to wait?

Nick Sanna: I can share one now that just happened a few weeks ago. In my most recent company, we decided to merge with another company to accelerate our roadmap. This was with a company called RiskLens, which does exactly what I said earlier: it helps quantify cybersecurity risk. But we were still highly manual in our approach, and customers were asking us to automate the detection of cybersecurity issues and the remediation, and we didn't have all the skills to get there. So we decided to merge with another company that had complementary skills and engineers with talents that we didn't have.

In the last two years, we had to join with another culture and see if we were compatible, also from the philosophical point of view, from the ethical point of view.

And there was a test a few weeks ago. One of our employees came to me and said, "Nick, I need to be open with you. I have an addiction problem and I need to take a leave of absence. And if you want to dismiss me today, I'm fine. Sorry I'm letting you down. But I think I need to be honest with you."

So I went to HR and told them about the situation. And what was interesting to me is that the HR manager came from the acquiring company: they had acquired the company I was CEO of. We brainstormed, and we came to a conclusion, even upon their suggestion, to do what we felt was right for this person: to keep him on the payroll for another 90 days, so he could get treatment, so he could keep his health care coverage and get all the coverage he needed, and then reassess the situation in 90 days, with no obligation for him to come back. So that in 90 days he could come back and say, "Listen, I'm fine now," or "I'm not," with no obligation and no questions asked.

What happened in the end is that he felt he needed more time for treatment. But he was incredibly grateful, because he didn't expect our reaction. He didn't ask for it. He just felt like he was letting us down. And he was amazed by our offer to support him with full salary and full benefits, so he could start treatment and not have to change anything in his life while he was doing it. In the end, we parted with a hug. Friends forever, I think.

For me, it was a big test, in seeing whether our new partner was living by the same principles. And we came to the conclusion: yes, we want to treat him the way we would like to be treated, like family. So for me that was a major test: that the bet I made in partnering with them was the right one, not just from a business and technical perspective, but also from the human perspective.

Part Four: The Economy of Communion

What it is

Interviewer: How would you explain the EoC to somebody who has never heard of it?

Nick Sanna: The EoC is a model whereby businesses orient themselves to the pursuit of the common good in the pursuit of their own business initiatives, building products that are helpful to the wider market and to society. They aim to build relationships of fraternity with their employees, their partners and the community around them. And in many cases they use their proceeds to help the community around them: whether that's funding initiatives to help people in need, providing educational opportunities, or reinvesting to create new jobs for people who need them.

Interviewer: How do you describe the EoC to people who have never heard of it?

Nick Sanna: The way I describe it is: it's an economy that works for everybody. I start with that. It's a company that works not only for the person who is running the business, but also for the person who is the recipient as a customer; and for the employees who are part of this business, who are treated fairly and more than fairly, like in a family; and also for the community around them. The business is a means to help the community, so that it reverberates in the community.

And in some cases academia as well. Last week on Friday I was teaching a class at Columbia University in New York, helping a professor by filling in for her in a class, explaining where the industry is going, and allowing her students to join many of our events for free so they can get a leg up on the new things happening in the industry.

Interviewer: If someone asked you what it looks like to run a business the EoC way, what would you tell them?

Nick Sanna: In the simplest way, I would say you're trying to run a business out of service to others, out of love for others. It sounds cheesy. But you really care for your customers, and that's how you start a business and develop products to solve problems they cannot solve anywhere else. And that's the principle at the basis of your relationship with your employees, with your investors, with your partners, and with the community around you. So I keep it as simple as that: how would you run a business if love for the other were your basic principle?

But one thing I want to say: is it always easy? No. I've been accused of being too soft, as if making tough business decisions is sometimes in opposition to being good to others. Because you still need to make business decisions, and they may be tough. Like the case I mentioned earlier, a reduction in force. Or shutting down a product because the market said it's not what the market needs, so you feel like you're letting people down, but it's the right thing from the business perspective and from the customer perspective. That's part of the game. This is not a popularity contest.

So it sounds cheesy, trying to do things out of love. But there are tough decisions to be made, and you've got to have a lot of courage and fortitude to make them.

Communion among people

Interviewer: The Economy of Communion claims that business can bring about communion among people. Have you seen that happen in your own business?

Nick Sanna: In many ways. Communion in business can mean many things. Communion can be trying to establish relationships where you become friends for life, because you build authentic relationships while working with people: serving them as customers, or partnering with community members, whether that's academia or people in society.

But you build a community also by living through a crisis together.

I remember one time when we had a situation. I had just hired a new go-to-market manager, and I thought it was a perfect fit. Two months later I came to realize that this person couldn't relate to this notion of cyber risk, which is foundational to what we do. She couldn't relate to it. How can you market what you don't understand or relate to? So we made a decision as a management team to let her go.

I called her into my office that day. She comes into the office and starts crying. And we're like, what's going on here? And she tells me, "Nick, I have to tell you something." And she tells me that she has stage four cancer.

So there was a moment where I had to decide, okay, who do I put first? In this moment, of course, I've got to put her first and listen to her. She tells me what she had just discovered. And she told me, "I don't know what to do. It's going to be devastating. I just started here a couple of months ago. What's going to happen to my career, my family?" And I said, listen, you don't need to worry about that. Your health comes first. Go take care of your health, do what you need to do, and don't worry about the rest.

After that meeting, I had to do two things. One, go to my management team and tell them that we had something going on that I thought was more important, and ask whether they were as committed as I was to supporting her for as long as the treatment was necessary. She had told me it may last seven or eight months, maybe a year. And they all told me, "Oh yeah, if we were in her shoes, we would like to be treated that way. We absolutely want to. Happy to support her." Then I had to go to my investors and explain that we wanted to keep her on the payroll to support her through that ordeal, while also hiring another manager, which we needed.

I remember going to the board meeting and explaining the situation, and there was a moment of eerie silence. We explained what I wanted to do, and nobody dared to talk. Then some people started making faces, and one investor actually came forward and said, "Nick, I commend you for that. That's exactly how I would like to be treated." And there was a moment where I felt a communion between the investor and us, espousing the values we wanted to live out in this situation. And then everybody else, maybe for the right or wrong reasons, I don't know, but everybody piled on and said, "Yes, that's the right thing to do." Only one person said, "It sounds like the right thing to do, and you'd better know what you're doing here." But I took that as the cost of doing the right thing sometimes. They have their own obligations in terms of returns, but we were willing to pay the price by putting this person first.

Long story short, she was able to get into remission. She came to me actually a few days later and said, "Nick, you had something to tell me. What was it?" And I felt that because of the spirit of communion, I had to be truthful to her. So I told her why I was going to call her into the office that day. She was a little bit taken aback, and I said, oh my God, nothing changes with your treatment or anything else. I've factored it in. It was not only my decision but also the management team's and the board's decision. And she came back and said, "Oh my God."

Long story short: once she got back from treatment and was in remission, we parted ways professionally. But we still have a social relationship, and we're still friends, and I think we will be forever.

A lifestyle, not a theory

Interviewer: Some say the EoC is not just a way of doing business but a lifestyle or a vocation. Does that resonate with you?

Nick Sanna: Absolutely. For me it was a lifestyle. Everything I'm entrusted with, or that I earn, I always think about in terms of: how much do I really need? Like a plant: it needs so much water to flourish. Do I need more than that?

I remember meeting with other CEOs. I probably had the smallest house, the fewest goods and the fewest possessions of any of them, and I focused more on serving customers and my employees than on trying to pocket money for myself. That was a deliberate choice. It was definitely a lifestyle.

And it applies to everything I do: even how I dress. I don't have an infinite number of shoes or clothes. I try to dress in a way that doesn't embarrass my customers or my employees when they go to see customers, up to a point. But I don't need expensive accessories. I don't even have a watch: a phone that tells me the hour is enough. The rest is for the family, for the business, and for the community around me. So I can use what I don't need for the good of others.

The free market

Interviewer: How do you see the EoC as compatible with the free market?

Nick Sanna: I think free market economics provides the opportunity for people to be responsible for what they're entrusted with in the first place. It allows people to take responsibility for what's entrusted to them, and to decide what they want to do with it, and, as an entrepreneur, to be a force for good. I think the free market allows you to do that.

My father was in foreign trade for the Italian government. We lived in communist countries as well, so I've seen the non-market economy, where you didn't have the freedom, you didn't own things, and other people were making decisions and telling you what to do. It was a very disempowering experience, where people just did things because they were told to do them, but with low motivation and a low sense of ownership. Being extra generous was not even encouraged. It was all systematized: that's what you do, because the system tells you to do so. And I felt that it diminished the responsibility we want to have in terms of making choices and taking responsibility.

So I think a market economy allows you to feel responsibility for what's entrusted to you, whether you own something or you earn something for your work, and then to decide what to do with it. And yes, you have the free choice to do good, the free choice to serve yourself, or the free choice to serve others. I think that's a very empowering experience, and the individual has a lot of power in that system. But I think the EoC allows you to put those motives to work for the common good, in ways that, when I experienced a communist society as a kid, were not even considered. You didn't even have to go there: the state would decide for you what is good and what is bad.

It starts with a gift

Interviewer: From its start, the EoC has said business starts with a gift. What does that mean to you?

Nick Sanna: That's an expression that's new to me, so it's good to know, and maybe I'm the ignorant one here. I like the sound of it, but I'm not so sure what is meant by it, so let me just be honest about that.

With our partners, we offer them business first and then we look for reciprocity. Maybe I'm living that idea, but I didn't define it that way.

I think the idea is part of the Focolare movement, which has then been brought to the business world as well: trying to live the art of loving. And part of the art of loving is being the first to love, taking the initiative. Which is a great quality to have in business: take the initiative in loving. And loving even when it's not reciprocated. Loving your enemy. Loving to the point where people start reciprocating, and you get to unity. Loving also when it's hard.

I think at the core of the EoC is putting the art of loving into practice in business. Maybe that's what is meant by the EoC beginning with a gift.

Interviewer: Some say the heart of the EoC is a human desire to give, this idea that you're actually fulfilled by giving.

Nick Sanna: For me, a gift and communion are not the same, because a gift can just be given, but for what purpose? The real goal is communion: to build a relationship where we have a unity of intent, of hearts, of minds, where we can support one another and become a family, whether we're business partners or colleagues or family members. That was the real goal.

So I like the term EoC, even though in America it's a word that's not very much used. People think of communion as something you do in the Catholic Church. But it really speaks to this deep sense of unity you want to bring about.

Beyond transactional

Interviewer: The EoC says business should be relational, not just transactional. How do you see that in your own business?

Nick Sanna: It has to be that way.

In our case, we teach our salespeople to build business plans. And the biggest sin is building a business plan that is just cut and paste from our marketing. When I see that we are not incorporating the words of the customer into the business plan, it means we may have taken shortcuts. We're putting words in the customer's mouth that come from our marketing, because we want to go fast. And that's where the problem starts. It becomes transactional. You're trying to follow the structure that may lead you to build what looks like a good business plan, but you're faking it.

The antidote, to give an example: we record our calls, so that we can analyze them and get better. And I believe the transcription of the recording of the calls more than what I often see in the business plans. That's with the permission of the customers, of course.

Because we may have the tendency (and money can do that to you) to take shortcuts, because it's expeditious, it's easy: cut, paste, check, let's go to the next thing. Meanwhile I'm not sure I understand the customer's problem. And the customer feels it as well.

I think it's a disservice to the business too, because if you don't understand the problem deeply, and you don't establish value deeply, what happens in the end? It's a transactional relationship, and it translates into them wanting more discounts, because they don't value what you do enough. Whereas if you go in depth, understand the need deeply, and can establish value in a deep way, then pricing is not an issue. It's almost secondary. Many customers test us that way: they want to make sure we can deliver the outcome to the degree they require, rather than just buying a product at the cheapest price. That's not the game we're in. But sometimes we fall into that trap, because we just cut and paste the marketing, versus going deep with discovery questions and drawing out evaluation criteria that may be very important for the customer.

Interviewer: Going beyond transactional business to real relational encounters. How would you explain that briefly?

Nick Sanna: We are always striving to build deep relationships with our customers, our partners and our employees. But sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where it feels much more transactional.

When it comes to the contrast between a transactional way of doing business and having meaningful encounters: I sometimes make a stink when customers tell me, "I just want to see your product, just tell me the price, and that's it." And I say, I cannot do that. And they say, "Why? I don't know what your problem is." And I say, I don't want to talk about a solution if I don't know where your need is.

It's a very awkward moment to begin a relationship with. But it's one that can build a more solid base than a transaction. Sometimes we're not receiving it on the transactional side, but it's up to us not to allow that to happen.

Beyond profit maximization

Interviewer: What about going beyond profit maximization to a culture of giving? How have you practiced that?

Nick Sanna: Many times a day. Engaging with a professor who says, "Hey, listen, you can help the industry", helping teach your trade to the next generation of leaders. In the short term, that's not an economical thing. Me taking half a day to teach students at Columbia University, students I may not be able to employ, who may not become my customers for many years: that's not about short-term profit maximization. Spending time with the community. Developing standards that your competitors might even benefit from. That's not about short-term profit maximization.

Of course, it has to be a balancing act, because you can't do everything for others; you also have to take care of your business. That discernment is happening all the time. But the attitude of giving (even in selling, and in taking care of your business) is an act of giving. Giving a solution to somebody's need and fulfilling that need.

Interviewer: And going beyond profit maximization to a life of giving?

Nick Sanna: My concept of profit maximization has changed over the years. I always thought that a culture of giving was somewhat antithetical to profit maximization, that you had to pay a price for being generous. But I think God has something else in mind. He wants to be a profit maximizer in the long term, with a lot of other benefits that may not always be financial, that may also be social. And I think they're going to be financial in the end too, just not the way accounting is taught in business school.

The common good

Interviewer: What about practicing business for the common good instead of just self-concern?

Nick Sanna: What comes to mind is a situation where I was being recruited to run a business. I was being offered a very lucrative pay package, a seven-figure package, so pretty significant. But it was a short-term lending business.

In the financial services industry, there's a segment of the population that cannot be served by classical banks, because they don't have a lot of assets as guarantees, and they need short-term lending to get by. There's a market that fulfills that at very high interest rates, and some major corporations in America do that.

For me, that's usury. At some point, yes, there is a need in the marketplace that it fulfills. But for me it's creating more dependency and exploitation, so I said no. For a moment I was very distressed: okay, that's a very luxurious package. But no, I don't want to create a world where more of that is happening. So I'm not going to do that.

Interviewer: With your background in economics, what's a better solution in your mind?

Nick Sanna: I can tell you what my heart says, and what I've done with some people.

I mentioned the example of the member of the community where I live in New York, where I lent some money. We discussed with my wife and members of the Focolare community how to help this person: to give him money for a deposit for a house, and for multiple months that exceeded his capacity on his salary.

And we decided to do it as a loan instead of a grant, because we didn't want to create dependency, and also because giving money with nothing in return can feel like not respecting the person, almost making them feel bad. We wanted to appeal to a sense of responsibility and dignity as well. So we said, we're going to loan you the money. And we also decided, out of our own hearts, to lend the money at zero interest, with no expiry date. Whenever you can, give us the money back.

Is that a sustainable business model? No. But with my personal money, I can decide the rules of the game. That's why I decided to do it this way. He could have gone to some other company and gotten a loan at high interest, which would have put him back into a state of dependency.

I think there are other models of microcredit that abide by similar principles, where people pool money and make microgrants at zero interest and appeal to a sense of responsibility because of the relationship with these people. There are such things: microcredit initiatives, including the well-known ones from Muhammad Yunus. Those are better models.

Interviewer: Practicing business for the common good rather than self-concern?

Nick Sanna: I find myself needing to ensure that my intent is correct, that I'm trying to practice business for the common good versus self-interest. I often find myself repeating, before something: I'm doing it for you, Lord, versus for myself. So that as I engage in this discussion, or in this meeting, or in this project, I do it for the right reasons.

Interviewer: How do you see what you do in your companies as helping the common good?

Nick Sanna: What we do in helping the common good is twofold.

One is developing products that actually help people. Working in a cybersecurity company, in cyber risk management, we're helping society and people (family businesses, organizations, universities) conduct business digitally in a safe way. I think that's a noble mission, versus allowing criminals to take advantage of us and destroy people's lives. You're solving a real need, and providing the basis for safe interaction among ourselves. You need to think about not just your credit card, but also what your kids look at and how they interact with digital assets. So being able to secure that, and help organizations prioritize what matters and find the most effective ways of securing their environments. I think that's a noble mission. Rising to the challenge of the threat actors and allowing people to go about their lives in a secure way is very noble. That's one.

The second thing is providing models for corporate governance that are driven by putting other people first, whether that's a customer, employees, partners, or the community around you. That's where I feel like we're changing the world, not turning it into a model where decisions are driven by greed, by self-interest only, where my win is your loss. I really believe in this possibility of finding fulfillment on many levels: the integral development of a human person, which also depends on how we decide to interact with one another and care for one another.

Unity

Interviewer: One thing said to be distinctive about the EoC is bringing about social and economic unity rather than winner-take-all. Have you seen that in your own work?

Nick Sanna: There are many examples, but the biggest one that comes to mind right now is the game we're playing with the FAIR Institute, our community play. This is where we're trying to put together people who in many cases are competitive with one another, to solve a problem that requires a village to address.

There were a lot of debates at the beginning, with people saying, why would you do that? Why would you share some of your IP with people who can take advantage of you? And we made a conscious decision that it was the right thing to do for the industry.

But it required putting people together, and also convincing them that we were sincere about it. We have competitors who are sponsors of the community that we started. They're giving us money, serious money. And at the beginning they were like, okay, is this for real, or is it a trap? Is it just a disguised marketing ploy that we're going to fall into?

Over the years, the community has grown and they are participating more and more, and the conferences are growing because of additional sponsors coming in, which shows the others that we're getting a benefit out of it as well, so it's okay to engage. It's not just a blatant, self-serving marketing exercise.

Interviewer: Can you think of any way your business contributes to unity? How does it bring unity to the world?

Nick Sanna: We try to build unity first by the way we engage with one another and build a community within the business. Because within the business we're different communities. Half of the team is in Europe and North America, and the other half is in India. Our engineering team spans different cultures, different habits, different religions. Being able to build family among people with very different upbringings (and different business habits) is an effort. It's not a given, so we need to build it there as well. And then by the way we behave with one another, we engage with the community, and we engage with society. That's how we build unity, and that's what comes to the forefront to begin with.

The other thing is the products we make. I don't think a business can be a communion business if it sells a product that brings disunity, or that is bad for people. But when I think about what we do today in cybersecurity, enabling people to safely interact with one another, communicate with one another, do business with one another, that helps build unity, and does it in a safe way, in a way that doesn't compromise your identity or your safety. I think it helps bring about a healthy way of putting people together.

Community in the firm

Interviewer: In your own business, how do you help build community, so that there's really a sense of community in the firm and it's not just a group of people trying to maximize efficiency?

Nick Sanna: I can tell you about our New York office. We have a new office with new employees, and many of them are part of a sales group.

I was talking to the managers and said, "Hey, listen, we want to get to know one another as people. Let's get together." The first attempt was, why don't we have lunch together once a week: we'll buy lunch. And what happened was that the first attempt wasn't good, because we bought lunch, everybody was served lunch, and then everybody took their lunch back to their desk and ate on their own. And we're like, that doesn't build community.

So we went back and said, hey, I'm willing to pay more to go out to a restaurant. A forcing function. Once a week, be around the table. We don't think about work, we shut our phones down, and we just get to know one another as people.

And I see this taking root. These people have been working together less than a year, and the other day, in the office, without me saying anything (because I'm the boss in the office), they decided on their own to do a small Christmas celebration and a white elephant gift exchange for themselves. These are small things. But everything helps.

Interviewer: A central place of community for the firm, rather than a system of efficiency and the bottom line?

Nick Sanna: Building a sense of community within a firm is, for me, a very dynamic concept. It's very situational. It's not driven by management meetings or Zoom calls. You find yourself with a bunch of other people in a moment, and it's up to us to build community in that moment, in the pursuit of a business initiative: deciding how to order lunch, having a party because we're celebrating somebody's birthday. Those are all centers of community in that moment, in that setting, with the people who are around you.

The whole person

Interviewer: Can you think of an example of recognizing employees as a whole person, rather than just as a cog in the machine to get the job done?

Nick Sanna: Now you're asking very introspective questions.

I had an employee who had the impression that we would pay for some help to personalize her workspace and make it more welcoming and productive for her, which was not actually the case. But she ended up buying a small treadmill, and she said, I think that's going to help me stay focused as I tend to be hyperactive, and I can type and do work while walking on the treadmill.

And when I heard that, and heard that she had misunderstood something, I paid for it out of my own pocket. I said, this is important for you, this is meaningful for you, and you're just getting started and just getting by on your salary, and New York is very expensive. Let me pay for it. And she was like, whoa, who would do that?

For me it's like, okay, that's meaningful for her, it's special for her, why not? Small things like this can make a big difference in people's lives.

Interviewer: Recognizing the whole person, rather than seeing employees as workers to get a job done?

Nick Sanna: The biggest temptation in the pursuit of business, especially when you have certain objectives to hit, is to see people as producers of goods or of results, versus understanding that they can contribute in many other ways.

That's something I always strive against, and I condition myself. I have a trick where I always try to start a discussion by trying to understand: how are you? But "how are you" not as a formality: what's going on in your life right now? And only then speak about business. It helps me center myself and makes sure I'm less distracted.

Interviewer: The uniqueness and dignity of each person?

Nick Sanna: One example about the uniqueness and dignity of the person comes to mind. Sometimes people ask me what it's like to be a manager, as if a manager is a special person who has more importance than others. And I say, listen, most of the time it's a miserable job. It's really a calling. If you're in the business of trying to solve other people's problems, and you have fun doing that and solving puzzles that way, go for it. Otherwise it's very miserable.

Any role in the company (a management position, an entry-level position, an executive position) is more a matter of calling and of contributing the best way you can, versus being an absolute superior to one another because of our title, our role, our pay grade. Everybody has their own contribution. You can be a top performer as a janitor. You can be a top performer as a sales director. You can be a top performer as the intern doing code work. Everybody has a role to play, and that can make a difference, including in living out the principles of the EoC.

Freedom and autonomy

Interviewer: The EoC was originally called the Economy of Communion in Freedom. How do you see part of your mission to your employees as helping them have more freedom and autonomy?

Nick Sanna: I always try to pay attention to this, and now I'm happy that my partner is thinking the same way as well: keep the number of regulations and processes to a minimum, and appeal to a sense of responsibility instead.

If you give people clear goals, and share your culture code with them, and tell them you're serious about it, they have the framework to make decisions autonomously. If they know what needs to get done and how we want to behave in certain situations, they can use their judgment to decide what to do, versus you trying to micromanage every single step in the process.

So we try to keep our policies really to a minimum, so that people don't lean on them and become lazy and not exercise judgment, but make decisions on their own and have the freedom. Some people really enjoy that, and some people are challenged by it, because they're not used to that freedom, and it forces them to step up and grow and make decisions on their own. I think it's a forcing function of personal growth as well.

A transcendent purpose

Interviewer: How does the EoC provide a transcendent purpose beyond just making money? In business we're taught to make more money, but not why.

Nick Sanna: For me, it was the initial intuition of the EoC in 1991.

What I saw was that in Brazil there was a community of focolarini trying to live the principle of the culture of giving. And despite the fact that people were regularly doing good and sharing their surpluses to help people in need, there were still people in need who didn't have jobs or couldn't make ends meet.

And the founder of the Focolare said some entrepreneurs could help. And they came forward and said, "We believe we have a role to play. We can help, as businesses, by giving people employment opportunities, by teaching them a trade, maybe by sharing some profits for education or for emergency support."

For me, that was a model. I've always been fascinated when I read in the gospel about the early community, where people put things in common and there was nobody needy among them, and I mean in terms of basic needs. For me it was like, oh my God, that sounds like utopia. But in the EoC, in the model of the first entrepreneurs who made that gesture, it was not utopia. It was actually real. And for me it was like: that's the world I want to build.

So people say, can we build heaven on earth? When we create the conditions for these things to happen, yes. Is there a higher purpose for me to live my life in business than that, in terms of aspiration? No.

So in the scale of things: making money for the purpose of taking care of my family, of course, but also taking care of the community and being an actor for good, for the betterment of people's destiny in the community: I feel that's the most important thing. I allocate part of my money automatically, on a monthly basis, in an arrangement I agreed with my wife, to go to the community, as part of my way of living this communion of goods, this culture of giving. So I share some of my personal profits on a systematic basis.

Self-giving

Interviewer: Another is the existential self-giving that comes about when you practice business the EoC way: creating a culture of encounter and love through business, rather than just keeping it professional.

Nick Sanna: I think it's a false opposition. People say that to be an effective business person you need to be a jerk. I think you can be an effective business person by treating people with dignity and respect. But that doesn't mean you're going to shy away from tough decisions, because sometimes you need to make tough decisions.

I've had to part ways with people who weren't a fit, and you need to make a hard decision. But how you treat the person in that process is really important. Think for yourself: how would you like to be treated if the inevitable conclusion is that this is not a fit and we've got to part ways? Do you need to be a jerk

in that process? No, you don't. You can be a respectful person.

There are many people we terminated over the years with whom we're still friends. In some cases they've said, this was the best thing that happened to me, because I needed to learn a lesson, and I needed a break to realize it. And then they realized that the experience we had was something they were not fully ready to embrace, but now they are, and it changed their trajectory.

And these things last forever. Sometimes people think, is this a story that never ends? It happens, and sometimes it ends. I'm in an innovation business; at some point we may sell the business, because the innovation needs to be put in the hands of people who can multiply it for the benefit of a larger industry, and also to maximize the profit for the shareholders, which is also a good thing. It's not the only goal, but it's an important piece.

And people say, where did the experience we lived together go? Did it die? And I say, it doesn't die, if in the next company we go to, we apply the same principles. So wherever you go, we may not be working together, but you are trying to affect that environment by your example and trying to live this culture we've been living, and to be a transformative example. The dream continues. It doesn't stop here. Whatever we lived remains true forever, and it becomes your inspiration for whatever else you do in the future.

These things are dynamic. You may feel we're riding high and doing things well, but things will change. And again, the only anchor we have is the present moment: how are we going to decide to live that present moment, in whatever setting we're in?

Interviewer: Can you give us a topic sentence of what your idea there was, that it's a false dichotomy?

Nick Sanna: The dichotomy in the industry is that people think being professional and being caring are two separate things. I think that's a false opposition. You can be highly professional and highly caring at the same time, and that's a role model. In some circles people call it servant leadership, and that's a model that actually exists, and that many people actually live out. So it's a false dichotomy.

Who it is for

Interviewer: People often say, "I don't own a company, so the EoC doesn't apply to me." How is the EoC applicable to those who are middle managers, or people who just have a regular job?

Nick Sanna: The lifestyle of communion can be applied by everybody. A little kid who has toys and allows his buddies and siblings to share them, instead of holding them for himself: that's the EoC too. You're giving and you're receiving. And building community is an act of generosity and of building togetherness.

Same thing for professionals. You may be working for a corporation that doesn't have EoC principles as its motive, but how you go about building relationships in your department, with your team, with your customers, that's up to you. You can decide to do it in a very selfish or egocentric way, or in a very selfless way that builds trust and community around you. That's available to everybody.

Interviewer: If you were encouraging a friend to try the EoC, what would you tell them from your own experience?

Nick Sanna: Because many EoC protagonists are entrepreneurs who own their business, some people think it's limited to people who own a business. For me, the EoC spirit is basically living a culture of giving. You can be an employee in a company that lives a completely different spirit, and you can still change the world one relationship at a time, by helping somebody who may need counsel at work, by helping a customer who may need extra time to understand your product, by helping a new intern shadow some of your work and spending time with them so they can understand what you're doing and be lifted up.

So you can live the culture of giving wherever you are. You don't have to own a business, and you can change the world around you. That's where it starts. Every moment, wherever you are, is an opportunity to put it into practice.

What makes it distinctive

Interviewer: When the EoC began in 1991 there were no B Corps and no conscious capitalism. Now it is a crowded field. What do you think the EoC offers that is distinctive?

Nick Sanna: I think what is distinctive is the commitment to a lifestyle that permeates your entire life.

In social entrepreneurship, I sometimes see well-intentioned entrepreneurs whose action may be limited to, we're going to donate one percent, two percent, ten percent of our profits to the poor. Meanwhile, is the right attention given to how we deal with one another? What is the nature of our relationship with our suppliers, with the community around us? Limiting it to one thing may make it easier to capture attention, and by the way, it's very noble; I'm saying it's better to do that than not to do it. But there may not be an explicit commitment to a lifestyle that permeates all the dimensions of your life. I think that's the biggest difference I see with many other forms of social entrepreneurship.

In some cases, social entrepreneurship may also involve building goods and providing services that are social in nature. But I think the EoC goes beyond even that, because I'm working for a for-profit business solving a technical problem, and I think it has a social impact. People may see it more in the category of a capitalist enterprise, a venture-backed enterprise that eventually needs to make a profit. But for me, that's just going to be a measure of success: that we solved a real problem, not the pursuit only of making money. And we were living EoC principles. I'm trying to imbue them and influence my partners to live that way as well.

So we can live EoC principles without being a B Corp, without being a social enterprise per se. This commitment to a lifestyle permeates many more dimensions than I see in other forms of social enterprise.

What it has meant

Interviewer: Looking back, what lasting impact has the EoC had on your life?

Nick Sanna: It changed my life. It changed my professional life. It gave me a purpose.

I came out of college pretty depressed. I didn't see an exciting future, because I wanted to go into international development and change the world, and all the projects I was looking at were objective failures, which is a depressing way to start your outlook on a career. And then the EoC gave me a model for how to put some of my talents to work in unexpected ways.

It just changed my life. I hated business people, and I'm a business person. Only a life-changing experience can do that.

What would make it stronger

Interviewer: What do you think would make the EoC movement stronger today?

Nick Sanna: I think the EoC has probably been a best-kept secret for many years. While the EoC was born within the confines of the Focolare movement, we didn't do a good job of spreading the word, or of finding language that was easy to understand and adopt for other people. Often we stayed in our circles and used our own buzzwords, and created a barrier to entry of sorts, almost intimidating. Other people say, "In the EoC I need to be this perfect entrepreneur who lives all these value drivers and culture codes, and you're either perfect or you can't do anything."

For me, living the EoC starts with small acts of generosity, kindness, and giving of your time and your talents at work. I'm not perfect, I make mistakes all the time, but as long as you make it a mission of your life to always improve and start again. So there shouldn't be a high barrier to entry.

And I think there's a lot of thirst out there. I think the new generations are looking for ways to conduct business with a lot of purpose. People accuse young students entering the labor force of entitlement, of not wanting to work hard. I think a lot of them are reacting to the old way of doing business, where you demean others and you build relationships in a way that isn't fulfilling, that's very materialistic. They're looking for a higher purpose. So it may often sound like they don't want to work hard. I think they're right in some cases, but it's also: what are they working for? What is the purpose? What is the mission? What kind of relationships are we going to build?

If it's to become greedy and just make a paycheck, and to treat one another superficially (in some cases badly, because I need to make a buck more than you), many people don't find that motivating anymore. So they're looking for a purpose. And I think the EoC can be responsive to that.

I don't think we've found a way to speak to people who have those aspirations and make the values of the EoC accessible. And I think this initiative that you're promoting here, writing a book and promoting the testimonies of people living it out, is very valuable.

Interviewer: Thinking about the worldwide EoC, what unique gifts do you think the North American EoC has to offer the rest of the world?

Nick Sanna: I think North America has the opportunity to help scale the EoC, by finding operating principles that are easy to adopt, what I'd call easy-to-adopt rules of the game. Americans are very good at taking ideas that may be complex and conceptualizing them into simpler practices. And I think we haven't done that. For the longest time we had a more purist, philosophical approach to things, and not

always practical advice on how to build the EoC or live it out. I think America can really give us the words and the tools to make EoC principles much more accessible to a larger public. I think America has this gift that other countries don't have.

Interviewer: Is there a saying of Chiara Lubich's that sticks with you when you are practicing business the EoC way?

Nick Sanna: When I think about Chiara Lubich speaking about the EoC, what comes to the forefront for me is her aspect as a teacher. In her own way, not being a business person, she tried to codify it.

At the beginning, I remember she was saying that these entrepreneurs can use the profits in three ways, in three thirds: some of their profits shared back into their own business so it can continue to flourish; a third for people in situations of emergency, for the poor, to help the poor; and a third maybe for educational opportunities, for people to get to know the EoC. She went on along those lines, almost like a teacher trying to codify how this could become a system that other people could adopt, almost coming up with a companion for business people to follow. I don't think we took the baton from her and pushed it much further. I think this initiative you're bringing about may be helpful in that regard.

So for me it's her ideal: that communion applies to business. That's amazing. She tried to codify it in her own words, but I think she was hoping that people would take that initial inspiration and develop it further. We have a lot of life experience, but I don't think we've codified it in a way that's easier for many people to understand.

Part Five: Leading people

Hiring and mentoring

Interviewer: Can you talk about hiring students right out of college, the joy of helping them, and how the EoC influences that?

Nick Sanna: Both on the commercial side, in sales and marketing, the area that I oversee right now, and on the product side that my partner, the CEO of the company, oversees, we rely a lot on hiring interns to begin with, and students coming out of college, to teach them a new trade.

I find it a very fulfilling mission, because it puts them in touch with a profession that is not yet fully formed, and it teaches them skills that are rare in the industry, which makes them uniquely valuable. What I find valuable is that we teach them not only how to behave in a business, how to become a professional, but also how to become an expert, and how to engage with big shots and big companies that have yet to learn about those best practices. We give them the confidence that with the right knowledge, the right business acumen and the right behavior, they can engage effectively with big companies.

And you see these people flourish. I remember, in a previous company (I met him in San Francisco a few weeks ago) one of my former sales development reps. These are people who start in a company doing prospecting; that's the very first thing you do in sales. But you do it in an ethical way, looking for needs that are unmet and then seeing if you can be a solution provider to meet those needs.

I met this guy and said, "How are you? What are you up to?" And he told me, "I'm a venture capitalist now." And I said, wow. In 15 years, you went from SDR, the very beginning of a career in sales and marketing. And he said, "Because of all the things you taught me, how to behave with people and how to be professional in our trade and a great performer, I became a sales manager. I became head of sales in some companies and was quite successful. Now I'm reinvesting some of my money in companies, to give other people a chance in business."

It was amazing for me. That was super fulfilling. He was grateful for the chance we gave him, and I was amazed to see him develop that way. Seeing the story repeated many times over is super fulfilling. It's almost a feeling of professional fatherhood: you're giving people everything you know and helping them develop.

It doesn't mean it's always easy, because some people come out of college and may not realize what a real work ethic looks like. There may be some people who come with a sense of entitlement, who think that things will be handed to them, and then they realize: hey, you want to defy gravity in an industry about innovation? You've got to study. You have to learn things that other people don't know, and be patient and diligent in doing so, and then apply yourself to it, because defying gravity takes energy. It will not be handed to you.

Interviewer: Have you had the chance to mentor or guide others in EoC values? Can you share a story about that?

Nick Sanna: Yes. We have a small circle of people who are engaged in the EoC, and often we reach out to people who are new to it and want to learn about it.

An example: some entrepreneurs told me, how do I make what we want to do more explicit? I struggle to find the words and explain the game we want to play. And I've found myself many times saying, listen, especially in America, people like explicit statements and clarity. Tell me what you're trying to accomplish here, and I can tell you whether I want to embrace it. They don't like ambiguity; they like clarity.

So in many of the companies I've been involved in, I saw value (especially as we engaged with the EoC) in building a culture code. Make it explicit: how do we want the relationships among us to be, with our customers, with our partners, in the community? Make it explicit. Put it in black and white, and maybe attach experiences to it, so that people understand it and can participate and embrace it.

I feel it's very empowering. If you give employees two things (clear goals of what needs to be done, and a clear understanding of what culture you want to build), then it's very empowering. They can figure out for themselves how best they can support those and embrace them. If it's ambiguous and not clear, it's much more difficult; confusion can arise, dysfunction can arise.

It doesn't mean it's going to turn on perfectly, like a switch. But you're going to increase the chances that people will achieve certain goals, abide by certain cultural values, embrace them, and be productive in their own right, because you make it clear what the rules of the game are.

The culture code

Interviewer: With your co-owners, how have EoC values directed you to engage with them, or to choose them?

Nick Sanna: As a business that needs multiple partners (and partners may be either employees or investors), you need to be very clear about the rules of the game you want to play. In most of the companies I've operated, we've always had a sort of code of conduct, a value framework, where we outline the principles by which we want to live and operate the business, and we ask people explicitly if they're okay with it or not.

We do this even now. We have a slide deck of about 100 slides that we share with new employees when they interview with us, and we ask them to go through it, because this is not for everybody. If you want to join us, these are the rules of the game, and if you're fine with them, let's go together. It's going to be a very empowering exercise. We want to treat each other a certain way, and we want to be uncomfortably transparent with one another.

For some people, that's not their cup of tea. Some people just want to be told what to do and have a very comfortable job. And that's not us as a company. How we treat one another, the selflessness that comes with it, is part of the game, and they need to embrace it.

That's very important with partners: make it clear. It can work with partners who may not even know the Economy of Communion. But if their principles are compatible with yours, it's good to make them explicit, so you can have a real grounded discussion, versus leaving it untold, and then in the moment of crisis you realize that you're on different planets and you judge the situation very differently. And you feel like, I hate what they're thinking, or that's not the behavior we want to have. Suddenly you feel completely disconnected, and you have a broken relationship.

Interviewer: What have you created to help people understand what the rules of the game should be? You said you have a hundred-slide deck?

Nick Sanna: What I'm referring to is that we developed a culture code in our business over the years. The culture code was a way to make the core tenets of our culture explicit for everybody.

At one of the companies, the number one item in our culture was putting others first. That was the first thing. And when new employees came in, we explained to them, with experiences, what that meant. The second was that we do things together: we gave a lot of priority to brainstorming creatively together rather than going solo. We didn't believe in the lone genius in the long run; we believed in a bunch of smart people coming together with the right motivations to figure things out. That was part of our lifestyle. And the list went on.

We also developed, as part of our HR practices, a 360 evaluation of management. On a regular basis, at least annually, we were evaluated against a series of qualities. And it started with how well we lived out the pillars of our culture code. Not based on self-attestation, or on your manager, but based on (at that time) about five people: maybe one manager, then two peers and two subordinates.

So out of that evaluation you would get what we believed was an objective view of how you were being perceived, in terms of living out both what we believed were the core tenets of our culture and the other qualities we believed were important in your role as a manager. People really appreciated it. They took it seriously, and it was a moment of real introspection and growth as we evaluated one another that way.

Those were a couple of instruments we created from an HR perspective in trying to live out the spirit of the EoC.

Interviewer: The company Cube is based on the Cube of Love. How have you encouraged your staff and partners to live these out?

Nick Sanna: First, by example. You've got to set the tone and show that there is a model in which people participate more, commit more, and become more generous with their time and their talents. If you feel a bad culture developing around you, show a different culture around you. And then point to the benefits of it, and highlight them.

And then reinforce it. When we had our 360 reviews on management, focused on how well you are living out the main tenets of the culture code, that was a form of reinforcement as well. So you need to show example, and then reinforcement. Those are really important.

Interviewer: Another one is supporting with actions, not just words. How do you encourage that in the workplace?

Nick Sanna: If you just speak about these nice EoC stories and these values and don't live them out, it's hallucination, and it's embarrassing.

I actually often talk about them, but it's a forcing function for me. I tell people I hire what game I want to play, and what my commitment to them is. But I also tell them I'm not perfect, and that they have permission to call me out if I'm not living out those values.

Whether they take me seriously or not, not always. They're like, hmm, this is strange; it doesn't happen to me often that a future employer tells me I can challenge them if they're not living certain things out. But I do it on purpose, because it's my commitment, and it forces me to live it out or make a fool of myself.

Sometimes that's how you take a risk: you take your heart, throw it over the fence, and then you spend your time fetching it. And you want to do it, because otherwise you get into the mode of, okay, I didn't say anything, low expectations, I don't have to abide by certain things. And then mediocrity seeps in, bad habits seep in, and you basically act like your former self.

Interviewer: How has the EoC influenced your business structure and organization?

Nick Sanna: I think where it has had the biggest impact for us is in how we assessed one another in several of the companies I've led. We tried not only to lead by example, and often to recount experiences of how we're trying to live our culture code, but then also to reinforce it with organizational practices, like annual 360 evaluations, where your peers and subordinates assess us as managers in terms of how well we're living out the pillars of our culture code.

The Cube

Interviewer: Another side of the Cube is to share expertise, time and yourself.

Nick Sanna: That's the first thing. When I prioritize my day, I tend to prioritize the people who need help: a new hire in need of knowledge, a customer, an open product request, a partner who is waiting for information or some approvals. By default, I go to them first, versus doing my own tasks. Because I'm there at their service. I made a commitment to them that I will serve them the best we can, put them in a position to be successful, remove the obstacles whenever I can, and not hold anything back.

That's my mantra: start first by helping them, and then get on to my own projects.

Interviewer: Another is to value every person and every idea.

Nick Sanna: That is my personal challenge, because I really believe in it, but I've been accused in the past of trying to be the smart guy in the room, and of being perceived as condescending in the process. That was very hurtful to my own pride, but I think very healthy in terms of my future development.

Because I'm a passionate guy. I get excited about new ideas, and about good ideas that come from customers where I actually have first-hand evidence. But just because I have a conviction doesn't mean I should cut people off. I should allow them to speak up, and then maybe offer my experience and why I believe this is actually something we should pursue, versus dismissing them right away because I feel I'm onto something big and really exciting, and so I feel justified in taking the lead, maybe too much, in a way that stifles other people's contribution.

Interviewer: And to be first to help others.

Nick Sanna: That's something I've developed into a habit: to have a bias toward helping others first, before helping yourself.

I got into trouble over time, though, because then people say, you're not getting your job done. So I need to block time for my own activities and tell them, listen, there are some things that need to get done. The worst thing you can hear from me is, "I want to help you, but maybe a bit later, because right now I have a priority I need to take care of." But they know they can count on me, and that I have a bias toward helping others first.

For me it's always difficult to summarize in business terms: customer first, then the company and the employees second, and I'm last in line.

Employees

Interviewer: What about with regard to employees? You gave one example already.

Nick Sanna: Here's another one. Remember we merged with this company two years ago. I remember we were at the end of a meeting, and we had another meeting the next day, a very important one. I was among the last ones in the meeting room, and I started cleaning the room, putting it in order, moving the chairs, this and that. And it was like, "Wait a minute, you are the CEO and the president of the company. You're not supposed to do that. Why would you do that?"

And I said, yes: I want to make sure that the people the next morning feel welcome, that it's a harmonious environment, and that they find the place the way they would like to find it. Because I knew it was so late, it had been a late meeting, that the cleaning people would not come.

And they looked at me like it was beneath my role. And then they realized that when I say leading from the front and being a service provider, it comes through in those simple acts.

Interviewer: When Mother Teresa began serving the poor in Calcutta, almost all of them were dying, and many died in her home. If she had judged herself by outcomes she would have stopped early. We can be too outcome-driven. How does that apply to business the EoC way?

Nick Sanna: I can speak from experience about something I'm living right now. We have quality objectives and things we need to do. And one of my employees called me and said, "Hey, I can't be in the meetings, because our child is in a mental health crisis. But I want to be on some calls. I'm going to the hospital, and I'm going to be on this call."

And I said, no, no, no. Your place is to be with your child and with your family. Forget about business for the rest of the month. You're going to be there for them. I'm going to tell everybody you have a family emergency. Don't worry about business.

That's how I'm trying to live it. I may not be able to save people in the street who are dying of hunger or of other ailments, but I can create an environment where, despite business pressures, we can take care of the people around us and do what is right by them.

When someone will not be helped

Interviewer: Can you think of other examples where someone eventually realized they were not a good fit because of the values?

Nick Sanna: I've been in situations where I wanted somebody to come out with a personal situation they had. There was another situation of addiction. And telling him (this was counterintuitive) we really want to help you, but am I at liberty to share this information, because we want to embrace you fully? And this person was not comfortable.

For me that was very painful, because somehow he didn't feel comfortable with this going on. It was very difficult for me to explain. He should have felt like he was in a family, and maybe he hadn't experienced that enough. My rationalization is that maybe he had been in situations where showing your weaknesses, or being helped, was something negative, something that would remain a stain on you, something you would be judged for.

For me it was painful, because this was the opportunity to be helped, and this was a moment where you can turn it around with the support of a bunch of other people. And this person didn't allow himself to be helped, and didn't want to open up and trust us the way we were ready to trust him.

So it's not always rosy flowers. Just because you want to love others, that doesn't mean everything turns out perfect.

Servant leadership and conflict

Interviewer: You talk about being a servant leader. How do you go about that and also deal with conflict?

Nick Sanna: A servant leader is trying to lead from the front by serving people, versus being served themselves. That's the important thing.

On dealing with conflict: like anything, before you deal with a conflict you need to make sure you don't pass judgment to begin with. Try to understand the situation. If it's a conflict between two people, understand where they're coming from and what their motives are. First, seek to understand, and ask them to do the same thing. Often what's happening is that people make assumptions, and draw wrong conclusions. In other cases there might be an actual conflict, where something bad is happening that is objectively bad and needs to be addressed.

I'll give two extreme examples. In one of my companies, we had a situation where an employee was systematically lying to customers to improve his own position, and withholding information, again to improve his own position. That was objectively wrong. And when we confronted this person, he would not accept the feedback and would deny it, so we had to part ways. There was no openness even to consider doing things differently.

Exercising leadership there means addressing the situation, because if you don't address it, everybody else will think that behavior is acceptable, and you're not living your culture code. You're telling them that dishonest behavior is okay, that we can do business that way with a customer. And it's not acceptable. So leadership has to call that out, confront the situation, and try to resolve it. In this case we couldn't find an agreement and had to part ways.

In other situations, there are often small conflicts where people just don't understand one another. They jump to conclusions, misinterpret things, misunderstand things, question each other's motives. And you just need to create a setting where you allow them to really understand one another versus judging one another. Your leadership is there to create the conditions for that to happen.

Hard times

Interviewer: Can you think of a time when EoC values really gave you the strength to push through a difficult time?

Nick Sanna: Many times. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, we had to make the difficult decision to go to a reduction in force. After trying everything (we cut down marketing expenses, travel, all the discretionary costs), we couldn't do anything else but reduce our workforce, because our expenses vastly exceeded our revenues at that time.

Having compared notes and reflected with the management team, we felt it was the right thing to do. But we wanted to make it an experience of communion, despite the separation we needed to have with many employees, and to do it well: allocating the little cash we had to give them longer severance, and

helping them find jobs. Our mission was to help them find jobs within a month, in a very difficult market. I'm happy to say that everybody found a job within a month, and our severance was longer than that.

I think the EoC helped me not to lose my mind in that process. Because you have all kinds of symptoms: your pride gets affected, your self-esteem, and you feel like you're letting people down. But something I learned over the years is that you can be upset with yourself for the things you can control; for the other things, you cannot be upset. You've got to put them in God's hands and say, I've done my part. Now let's do the best we can given the circumstances, given the hand we're dealt.

The EoC gives me clarity and the peace of mind that if you have your heart in the right place and do things for the right reasons, there's no challenge you cannot go through. For my mental sanity, that was a big help.

Interviewer: Can you think of a time when you were tempted not to follow your EoC values, because it made business harder, but you followed them anyway?

Nick Sanna: I had a boss who accused me repeatedly of being too soft, because he interpreted my treating people with respect and dignity as a way of shying away from tough decisions. And he would say it very directly to me, in ways that in some moments could feel potentially threatening.

For me, that's non-negotiable. I was tempted at some point: maybe I'm doing it wrong, maybe I need to put on a show to appease him. But no, that's not right. You feel tempted; that's the easy way, to just let go and make him feel okay about it. And you think, no, what are you doing here? That's not going to work. That's not how you want to treat people.

And what happened, I think, is that I had a positive influence on him in the end, by not caving to his request, and by showing that we were making effective and sometimes tough decisions while treating people with respect and dignity, and in some cases generously as well.

Listening, and unlearning

Interviewer: You've said that you want to make a quick decision, but that it's very important to listen. Why is listening so important?

Nick Sanna: If you're in a commercial business serving customers and meeting their needs, what we do in the abstract doesn't matter. What really matters is meeting a need. And if you don't understand the need, you're nowhere.

This is where I like to be very much in front of customers, meeting them in person, to understand deeply and not always rely on reports from people in the field who work for me. Often they say, "Don't you trust us?" And I say, I trust you, but I also need to understand it myself. I need to understand it deeply to build a conviction that we understand the need, that our project is aligned with it, and also so that I, as supporting cast, as an executive, can support and think through how we can best meet that need. The current product may only meet 80% of the need, but future development may need to meet 100% of it. Unless we understand the need deeply, we can't get there.

It's absolutely paramount; otherwise, everything falls apart. We tell ourselves: we have very intelligent people, but what we think is the right solution doesn't matter. What matters is understanding the customer best. Then we can apply our intelligence to find solutions that fit. But unless we understand the customer deeply, nothing else matters. It's just an illusion.

Interviewer: What are a couple of the things that were hammered into you in business school that you now fight against?

Nick Sanna: One thing I learned, which is also an African proverb, is: if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together. That's not taught in business school. They tell you about building teamwork, but it's taught as a way to make people do what you want, to achieve the objective you're setting, not to get the most out of the team, to enrich the idea, to have people influence and challenge your ideas, to make the best ideas stand and have everybody contribute and get the best out of them. There are obvious, clear business benefits to that, but it's not being taught and it's not being valued.

What we're being trained in is: what's the shortest way to the goal? And putting the manager, the individual, the executive in a position of authority to influence the largest number of people, versus creating a game where a group of people getting together can have a disproportionate impact, greater than the best idea of the smartest guy in the room.

Now it's become more and more second nature for me: when I have a new idea, I'm always looking for somebody to challenge me and give me feedback, because I know that together we're going to get to the right conclusion faster, and maybe shed a bad idea faster too. Being detached from my idea in that way, and finding a buddy at work with whom to do this, is very beneficial.

We do this with customers as well. At the beginning of my career, I used to think you needed to be a genius and tell everybody how the world should run, only to realize that you'd better listen to more customers and challenge them. They're going to tell you what the right way of solving it is, and whether it really meets their needs, versus you trying to impose your own way.

For me that was a big change in mindset, from "I'm going to tell you what is right" to "let me shut up for a while, let me ask a bunch of questions." Or if I have a proposition: what is your feedback? Let's iterate.

And I learned that success for us, even on the product side, is iterative. You come up with assumptions, but then you iterate based on the feedback you get from the market, because you need to meet needs that are out there, not what we think is the right need. So it's almost like a pursuit of first principles, a pursuit of the truth. What does the truth look like in that situation, versus what we think? Who cares what we think?

Interviewer: What would be your advice to CEOs? What do they need to watch out for in that role?

Nick Sanna: What I'd watch out for, as it pertains to the EoC: if you create an environment where people feel they have a say in things, and feel that it's a safe environment to speak up, and feel that they can participate in the innovation discourse, then your level of innovation and your ingenuity in solving problems in original ways is going to grow tremendously.

Make sure you don't stifle that by using your own (often very brilliant) intelligence in a way that doesn't allow people to open up. Because ultimately, the people who best understand what's happening out there are the ones in the field, closest to the customer, closest to people in need. Listening to them is really, really important. Making too many decisions behind a desk doesn't always hit the mark.

You can start innovation and mobilize people for a little while through the force of persuasion, but it doesn't get you very far. So there are business benefits to creating a participative environment with customers and employees, versus having a very top-down culture. A top-down culture can be very regimented and look very efficient on the surface, but it may not get you as far as it could.

Joy

Interviewer: What moments bring you the deepest sense of joy or meaning from practicing business the EoC way?

Nick Sanna: That's a good question. I need to reflect on it; it's a very introspective question.

I think the biggest moment of joy in trying to live according to the EoC principles is when you see people embracing those values for themselves. Often you hire people who come from bad experiences. They've been in organizations where they felt they were badly treated, where you couldn't be forthcoming with one another, where being generous was seen as a weakness, where you just needed to shut up and do your job. So they come to you with those experiences and those habits.

Often we tell them how we want to behave, and at the beginning they are a little bit cautious. They're trying to see: is this just a corporate facade? A good story to attract people to this company? Or are they for real? And especially in the moments of truth, when you've got to make some decisions, we are put to the test. Those values are put to the test, and they realize it's for real. Then they start letting go of old habits and embracing them, and become protagonists themselves, showing behavior that is imbued with those values. That, for me, is the biggest joy.

You can see those turnarounds, and people saying, "This is a company, or a group of people, with whom I can be myself. I can finally trust others, and I can be daring enough to build quality relationships and generous relationships with others, and aspire to the betterment of our environment", whether that's in our office, with our customers, or with our partners. That, for me, is the most fulfilling.

Interviewer: You're almost doing rehab work, helping them learn that business can be good again.

Nick Sanna: Absolutely. I had to live it myself, and I'm still working on it: undoing the habits that you acquire through your education, because in business school they teach you the opposite. They teach you how to maximize the output of yourself and how to manipulate others. They don't use the word manipulation, but that's how it sounds many times. Undoing that, and playing a different game, takes time. It takes practice.

Interviewer: A moment that has brought you the deepest sense of joy from practicing business the EoC way?

Nick Sanna: The most joyful moments in living out the EoC have been moments where you see people sharing the impact it has had on their life. Whether that's, "I found a way in life: I thought life was going to be miserable, because I had a strange relationship to work, and I found a way that work can be highly fulfilling to me."

Other very fulfilling moments are when customers say, "Oh my God, I got a promotion. I got a new job. I got much further in life because of the interactions we had."

And also people who lifted themselves out of a situation of need and were able to walk on their own two feet as a result.

Challenges

Interviewer: What are the unique challenges that arise from trying to live out EoC values? When does it become challenging?

Nick Sanna: It can be hard, because often your motives are misunderstood. And this is about a lifestyle in general; it can manifest at home too.

I had a situation where one of my close family members, a sibling, was in dire straits and needed really big help. Typically in our families the mantra is, you don't want to mix money and family, so you can be very cautious. And I said, listen, I want to help my sibling and be generous even if this person may not be in a position to repay, with everybody telling me, you shouldn't do that, it's not the reasonable thing to do, there are other ways in which you can help.

Same thing in business. Often, as in the situation where we wanted to help the employee who had an addiction: the normal way would be, okay, let's part ways, take care of yourself, and then leave them on their own. Versus spending corporate money, with no assurance of return, to support this person and make sure they get through treatment and are taken care of. That's not normal. And you can face misunderstanding from board members, from other employees.

But that's always a test. You make your own discernment. You check with others to see if they're on board or not. But at some point there comes a moment when you also need to make a decision, and sometimes you may be judged for it.

I've been accused many times of not being easy to figure out, because you seem to be good to people, but you also make tough business decisions. Usually when people make tough business decisions they act like jerks, whereas I'm trying to care for the people. Maybe it takes a bit longer, you spend more time with them, you try to understand and invest more time in understanding the situation. For many people that's difficult to understand. But for me it's an opportunity to show what it takes, and to put myself to the test of what it takes to understand a person fully, and to give a person a chance, making a decision for highly caring reasons versus doing it the easy, most efficient, most productive way.

Interviewer: And the unique challenges that arise from practicing business within the EoC framework?

Nick Sanna: The biggest challenge is your own ego. You have to put up with yourself and your own limitations, and realize that you can stand in the way of fostering a more collaborative, more family-style environment, because often your ideas and your intuitions get in the way. I feel like I'm often the biggest obstacle in the process. That's number one, because the change starts with me.

The rest is important, but more and more as I get older, I consider it context. However other people react to you, the cards you're given, you can put yourself in a better or worse situation, but often it's not of your choosing, and it depends on what you make of it. So the biggest obstacle is not being centered on the right things.

Part Six: Running the business

Customers

Interviewer: Living out EoC values can lead to decisions that are countercultural, counterintuitive to traditional practices. Can you share a moment when EoC values guided a real decision, with regard to your customers?

Nick Sanna: Well, the example I made earlier, the one with AT&T. The alternative decision would have been: you don't have the money to pay me, so I'm going to stop services and hold you hostage until you have the money. Or, in this case: you have a real need and you find yourself in a bind, and I come through for you in that moment of need, taking a risk that you might not be in a position to pay me.

I've done it in my personal life as well, with some family members who were in moments of need, and I was able to help them financially. In some cases I got the money back. In some cases I didn't get the money back. I wouldn't live it any other way.

Interviewer: Could you share a short version of an experience with a customer?

Nick Sanna: A big-company customer had a need but didn't have the funds to fund it, and asked us to give them consideration despite that. Because there were personal dependencies and destinies attached to the outcomes of that project, we decided to make an act of faith and help them, despite their not being able to pay us in the short term, believing that in the future, when funds became available, they would make us whole.

We had no guarantees on paper. But we made an act of generosity for their sake. And we forgot about it completely. A year and a half later they came back, the funds had been granted, and they've probably been friends for life because of it.

Interviewer: Have you ever decided to sever ties with a client because they were not a good match?

Nick Sanna: Yes. We found ourselves in a situation where we got the attention of the largest private company in North America. And they tried to convince us that for a half-million-dollar project, we should derail our entire engineering process to satisfy their particular needs as a company.

Half a million seems like a lot of money, but in the big scheme, in the history of our company and the revenue we have, it was not a huge contract. And they were very upset with us that we didn't just get on our knees and thank them for their generous offer.

We explained to them: listen, what you're asking for is something no other customer is requesting, and the level of effort it would take to produce it would be at the disadvantage of everybody else, because we wouldn't be able to focus on what the rest of the market wants. They were very upset about that.

We made a decision. I went to the board and said, listen, we've got the attention of the number one private company in North America. They're offering half a million dollars to do custom work for them in a way that doesn't help the other customers, and we don't believe it's a good fit. We don't believe it's a win-win partnership.

And the board agreed. They said, we commend you for that, because a big mistake many companies make is saying yes to everything, every piece of business, even if it's not in the long-term interest of the company. We were fortunate to realize that there could have been downstream negative effects of entering that relationship: becoming dependent on them without realizing it, and being at their mercy, and not being able to continue to engage at the right level of quality with the other customers.

So we had to tell them: thank you for the attention and the consideration, but we don't believe it's a win-win relationship. And we explained why. As I like to say in business: it's either win-win or no business.

Interviewer: I bet they don't get turned down much.

Nick Sanna: That's what I think as well. It's a big logo. It was hard. We had some discussion, it didn't take long, a day or two of discussions. I went to the board, and they said, makes total sense. Look at the big picture.

Ethics

Interviewer: What about ethical behavior? How does the EoC drive you to act in ways you don't always see in your industry?

Nick Sanna: In our industry, less than ethical behavior often occurs because we innovate. We make bets, and companies make bets on us. And it's not always black and white, because it may be that they trusted us to do something and we didn't innovate exactly in the way they wanted.

In some cases (it happened to us a week ago) they bought something believing we were doing that thing, but because there was ambiguity, they made a bet and then realized they had a different need. And they asked us to cancel the contract. It's the first time that happened in 10 years. They asked us to cancel because we didn't meet the requirements to begin with. But there was no malice there.

We could have held the line and said, "Listen, you signed a valid contract. You owe me money. Tough luck. See you in court." Or we could understand them and ask what the right thing to do is. We debated it internally: again, these are not always easy decisions, especially for the rep, who was also counting on

the commission and everything else. But then, realizing it's the right thing to do: listen, we acted in good faith, we made some representations, they acted in good faith as well, and then realized their needs were something different.

So the ethical thing to do in that moment was to say, "You're right, you don't have a need that we can fulfill right now. Let's part ways, and hopefully when you have needs that are more in line with what we do, keep us in mind." And they were like, hmm: they thought it would have been a bigger fight.

The other ethical example I can provide is deciding what to disclose to investors. There can be a tendency in some moments in business to embellish things, to make you look better and get a better valuation. But we made a decision as a business never to lie to investors or to our employees. Even in moments where we were raising money on the back of a bad quarter, instead of trying to find a way to embellish it, we tell them right away: "Listen, we hit a bad patch. Here's what happened, and we believe we can turn it around. But right now it's objectively bad, and here is what it is." With a straight face.

Those are choices you make. It would be very easy to bend, to make them hear what they want to hear, knowing you're stretching. But we want to live without regrets. If we want to be friends for life, that's not how you would treat friends.

Interviewer: And ethical behavior?

Nick Sanna: EoC principles help me go beyond the rule of law. There are rules and regulations that tell you the minimum acceptable behavior, and you could go by that. But what does this action mean for the good of the customer? Are we really meeting the spirit of a win-win relationship? Or are we just doing the minimum to maximize our profit, even if it's at the cost of the customer in the long term?

Marketing

Interviewer: What about marketing? Is there any unique way there?

Nick Sanna: Oh, marketing, oh yes. In our industry there's a tendency of faking it until you make it. Basically, you project that you're already solving the problem while you're still in the process of solving it. So at some point, how truthful do you want to be with the customer? That's a decision you make. Because the entire industry says you can be aggressive, be ahead of your skis, and there's a tolerance in the industry for that, because they understand the game you're playing.

But then there are moments where you might be responding to a request for proposal, and they say, "We're looking for products that meet all these criteria." And if you are faking it before you're making it, you may be tempted to say yes to everything (we do everything) knowing that there are certain things we don't do as well and certain things we don't do at all. So being truthful in projecting what you're good at and what you're not, and establishing a relationship based on truth and trust, is paramount.

I remember we made a bet, because we knew that the competitor was lying and saying yes to everything. I said, no, we're going to keep being truthful to the customer. And in the end, we ended up getting the deal awarded. I asked the customer, why did you choose us? And they said, "I like the product, you have an amazing product, and I like your people. But I liked how you guys responded. Because there was a competitor that said yes to everything, and we didn't believe it was true. You guys

have been very forthcoming about what you're good at and what you're not good at, and where we needed to find alternative solutions. That's how we want to partner, because we're not looking for perfect, we're looking for trustworthy. So that when challenges come in the future, and challenges will come, we know you will treat us the right way, versus being surprised every time and having to second-guess you every single time something happens."

Interviewer: And marketing?

Nick Sanna: The EoC influences marketing in a couple of ways. One is making sure that before we say anything in marketing, we understand the customers really well, so we can put ourselves in their shoes and understand their deep needs. Because marketing needs to start with the customer, not with the product.

And then, when you talk about your product as being a solution to a need, making sure you're truthful: setting a clear expectation of what you can deliver and what you cannot, so you can engage in a relationship on a basis of trust and transparency.

Structure

Interviewer: What about the way your business is structured and organized? How is that countercultural, or uniquely EoC?

Nick Sanna: I don't know if it's uniquely EoC, but in terms of organizational structure, when I think about how I apply the culture of the EoC, I'm trying to make it a very participative environment. For me personally, that's in two ways. One is recognizing the intuition that comes from everybody, and making a very deliberate effort to recognize that.

It might not be my tendency, because my tendency, naturally, is always to look for the things that don't work, in order to fix them. My personality is a fixer. That's my gift and my damnation as well. I'm always looking for something to fix, which can sometimes be ungrateful, because you're always looking for what's broken versus recognizing what is working.

So for me, living the EoC is pausing and recognizing the things that are done well. When I do my weekly summary and publish it to the company, as many others in our company do, we're trying to highlight both the good and the bad with equal respect. For me it's always an exercise to be balanced in that way: to give people credit when they've done good things, but also to call out the things we need to roll up our sleeves and work on.

Money and profit

Interviewer: What about the use of money and profits? How have you made unusual decisions there, rooted in your EoC values?

Nick Sanna: Well, profits: in the case of our companies, because we're innovation companies that are venture funded, we most often don't deliver profits. We are money-losing businesses, because we are taking investor money to innovate and solve a problem that was previously untreatable, and to create

value by the sheer nature of the problem that we solve. We're solving a problem that will generate profits in the future, but you're going to have an upfront investment before you realize those profits.

My trajectory has always been in the early stage of those companies, until they become profitable. Then it's a different game (a game of efficiency) and that's usually not my sweet spot. My sweet spot is really taking a company off the ground and innovating, getting to product-market fit. Then it's scaling, which is a different game.

For me, the profitability question came in on a personal basis. I'm paid for my work, and I was lucky to be paid adequately for my job. How do I deal with my personal money? How do I live? According to the Economy of Communion principle: what is it that I need, and what is it that I don't need? So, along with my wife, we decide what it is that we want to keep for ourselves and what it is we can give to others: whether that's to the community, to the church, or to people in need.

With that image: only keep for yourself what you need, and not much more, because there's so much need around you. We'd rather be in a society that flourishes than feel like we are living at the expense of others. I wouldn't feel okay with that. I wouldn't be at peace with it just being about me, me, me, accumulating, while feeling that around us there are people in big need.

Interviewer: How do you strike that balance? Do you struggle with it, when you have your own family?

Nick Sanna: You always struggle with it, because it's a balancing act. There are some decisions I make for myself personally: my wife thinks sometimes I'm too thrifty. Before buying shoes (and I don't know if this is going to be on camera; if my employees see this they may laugh about it) I don't go to designer stores. I try to go to TJ Maxx or Nordstrom Rack and see if they have good deals. And people say, you're getting well paid, you don't need to do that, you can go to the designer store and buy the latest model and nobody will challenge you. Actually, they'll appreciate it. But it doesn't feel right to me.

On the other side, we live in a nice apartment in New York, because I walk to work and it's in a nice part of town. That's good for me to host my family, but also to host people in the community, where they can have meetings: we have people visiting almost every second week. So it's also for that. For me it's like, okay, we have a nice place, but it's not just for us, for our own enjoyment and separation from others; it can also provide a room for enjoyment for others who couldn't afford it.

An example: my wife has a cousin in France of modest means, and she said, "Oh, you're in New York now. Can I come and stay ten days with you and my boyfriend?" And my wife is like, is that okay? Yes, okay. Listen, we're here also for other people's enjoyment, including family.

But it's always a question. You always have to examine: are you making these decisions about money, about buying things, about enjoying things, for the right reasons? And my peace is: if you're doing it out of love, if you're doing it for the betterment of your community, your family and others, that gives me a lot of peace.

And I clarify it for myself if I'm in doubt, like you did: you clarified your idea by speaking to a priest on campus. I try to validate it with people I trust who are trying to live the same spirit: what do you think? So it's never black or white sometimes. It can be either way, and a lot of it depends on the motives you have behind it and why you're doing it.

Interviewer: And the use of money, or profit?

Nick Sanna: The biggest impact I see in the use of money and profit in my personal life is having a sense of detachment. Money is something that can be useful for doing things, and it's not necessarily something that's for me. It can also be for me, my family and my kids, but also for others. It's a gift of God as well, that you can apply in many ways to help humanity.

Co-owners

Interviewer: And decisions about co-owners?

Nick Sanna: The way the EoC helped me think about co-owners is: are we on the same wavelength when it comes to our values? Can we judge a situation with the same heart? That's very important, because you need to have the same motivations and the same well-intended heart. Otherwise things fall apart.

Investors and the board

Interviewer: How do you let your investors know how you run things, so that they know you're a good match for them?

Nick Sanna: When we raise money, good investors are trying to understand what you stand for, especially for times of crisis, when there are difficulties and tough choices to make. They want to know from the first day. I'm going to be honest and straightforward and tell them the truth and do the right thing.

But then it's on me to make explicit what our code of conduct is, what our culture code is. It's on me to make it explicit: this is the game we want to play, and you're okay with it or not.

And as I said before, in some cases they think it's a cute thing. Everybody has a nice manifesto; it's what you do to attract hires. But then, when moments of crisis come, you make a decision accordingly, and they realize, oh my God, they're taking it seriously. It's not just a facade. In some cases that's very comforting. In some cases it's unsettling for them. That's just the nature of these relationships.

Interviewer: Can you give us an example of how you engage with your board?

Nick Sanna: In the last two years I haven't engaged with my board, because I'm not the CEO in this company. We merged companies, and again, I made an exercise of humility, because as CEO of another company I realized we couldn't solve the problem just by ourselves. So I needed to find a business partner that had complementary skills, and I decided that we were compatible enough in shared vision and values that we could work together. Now I defer to him to interact with the board.

But over the 25 years prior to that, when I was interacting with boards, it was an interesting thing: it was a maturation process. I always thought I was very forthcoming. But I always had some judgment in me, and the judgment was often: they don't get it. They don't fully get it. I get it, we get it, but the board doesn't fully get it.

And then one day it dawned on me: if they don't feel they get the situation, why is that? And then I realized: because maybe they don't have all the data points to assess it. And whose job is it to give them all the data points, to have full visibility? It's mine.

So that was a maturation, as a professional and as a CEO: to realize that I had a big role to play in building a relationship of transparency, mutual respect, and also good governance. I cannot just expect them to reciprocate good manners and good behavior. I have to be forthcoming not only with the minimum requirements, but to the extent that they see what I'm seeing, so that they can have the right judgment on the business and on situations, as if they were present there.

For me that was a realization: wow, I wonder how many businesses do that. Whether you do the minimum, just to get by so you can do what you want, or you provide uncomfortable transparency, radical transparency, and allow them to see what's really happening, so that they really are partners, and you actually give them the means to act as real partners, because you give them the means to properly assess situations.

Interviewer: And the board?

Nick Sanna: The EoC changed my perception of the board. At the beginning of my career I thought it was a necessary evil: people give you money and then try to keep you in check, because that's what you have to put up with.

And then I started discovering that there's a lot of talent there, people who really want to help. They can be an extension of your team. They can become strong supporters if you allow them to. So it's about being able to engage them and build a synergistic relationship where we help one another in the pursuit of common goals.

Partners

Interviewer: Can you think of any examples where customers, employees or peers were startled by the way that you were doing business?

Nick Sanna: There's a moment with customers and partners where we're trying to figure one another out and work out what kind of game we want to play. And I always make it a point to explain, almost looking for an excuse to tell them: here's how we want to build a relationship, a real partnership relationship.

Let me give you a small example. We rely on partners for our distribution network; we sell to customers through partners. We decided to commit to a partner strategy a year ago: instead of going direct to customers, use partners to have a multiplying effect on distribution.

In our industry, the way most companies do it is they leverage partners, but if there's a way to make an extra buck by going direct, they're going to do it. And what that does is break the relationship, because then the question becomes: do you want to partner with me, or are you going to go direct? What is this thing? There's a sense in which people are a bit jaded in this industry, and feel like people are not always truthful: they want to partner, but they're not fully in it.

We decided not only to be partner-first, but to be partner-only. To the point where I turned it into an operational practice: I told the salespeople, I'm not going to pay your commission unless a deal is on partner paper. So I didn't give them a choice. But it forced them to really keep partners in mind, and to be truthful with them that we're not going to shortcut them if we can make an extra buck; we're going to be faithful to the relationship.

And then they notice it, and it creates a reciprocity. If they feel you've been truthful with them and can be trusted, they're going to be less reserved in bringing you into their business, knowing that if they introduce you to a customer, they're going to be allowed to close that business on their paper and reap the benefits of it, and not fear that they're going to be cut short by a greedy salesperson.

Interviewer: Can you speak to gratuitousness and reciprocity, and the role they play in how people in the EoC think about business?

Nick Sanna: In the EoC we want to build relationships of reciprocity. We want to do good by people, but we also want to create the conditions for people to want to reciprocate at some point.

I think it's human nature. In their innermost selves, people are happier when they can be good to others, when they can be helpful to others, than when they are just receiving. They may not have practiced it. They may not have experienced it. But when they've been put in a position to do it, it's a very fulfilling experience. And we're trying to create the conditions for that.

To use the example of our partners: we teach our people, especially in sales, that when you want to engage with a partner, you've got to give. Start by giving. Feed them business. You've identified some customers, and you're going to bring those customers to them. You have a customer ready to close business, and you say, I want to put it on your paper. And they're like, "What? Why would you do that?"

And that builds a relationship. You do it once, twice, three times, and at some point (whether for the right reason or the wrong reason) they start feeling bad about it. They say, these are good people, we should probably feed them back. I have three other customers with the same problem; you guys should come with us, let me introduce you to them. So that's an example of how we can stimulate reciprocity by taking the first step and showing that we're truthful about our part of the bargain, to the point where at some point they reciprocate. And we've seen the fruits of it.

Our sales team was a little skeptical at the beginning about how fast partners would reciprocate, and we've been surprised at how quickly it happened. I have to commend our team: they were very proactive in feeding partners with business, which at the beginning felt irresponsible. You're giving them business, and you have less margin because you need to give them a cut of a deal where they've done nothing, and you're hoping they're going to reciprocate. And now the experience is: oh, that's good. It's differentiating for the business, and we reap the benefits of it. Now probably a third of our pipeline is coming through partners. They're feeding us.

Competitors

Interviewer: What about competitors? Do you have countercultural ways of engaging with them?

Nick Sanna: With competitors: they're people who are trying to make a living and innovate in their own way, so there is a respect I feel. They're not my enemies. They're my business competitors, but that doesn't mean they're bad people.

Many times I've befriended competitors. And if they can meet a need better than we can meet it ourselves, I'm happy to refer customers to them, which might not be intuitive. Again, I'll make it a point to tell my customers what we're the best in the world at and what they're good at, and if we're not the best in the world at something, I'm happy to refer the customer to them.

But it's not always understood. I've been in situations where I offered my hand to a competitor and they wouldn't shake my hand, they wouldn't talk to me, because I was the enemy. So living this life doesn't guarantee that everybody's going to be your friend. What's important is that you make the first step and offer the opportunity to build a relationship, a communion, and it's up to them to take it or not.

I'm going to tell you a story, because one of those competitors wouldn't shake my hand or talk to me. He was in big need recently. His company was going under, and he asked us to help him. We bought his company a month ago, within a week, and it's now part of our company.

Interviewer: He's the one who didn't shake your hand?

Nick Sanna: Correct. And I've never mentioned it to him, so I've never held it against him. A few people know the story in the company, but we try not to rub it in his face, and to build something new.

Interviewer: There's this idea, instead of seeing competitors as enemies, of being starters of cooperation. Can you share a story about that?

Nick Sanna: I remember this scene. I was at an industry conference in our business. I went to a restaurant with my business partner at the time, and we found ourselves sitting really close to our top competitor. The CEO of their company was sitting right there (I could almost touch him) and their head of marketing was there too.

I recognized him and said, "Hey, I want to introduce myself. I'm Nick, and here's my business partner. Pleased to meet you." He wouldn't take my hand. His VP of marketing came over to me afterwards and said, "I'm a big fan of your methodology, and we should talk." And the CEO told him not to talk to us.

Long story short, a few years later that same CEO's company was in dire straits and his company needed to be salvaged. They were running out of money. They didn't have enough money to support their products or their customers anymore, and they needed to find a buyer, a good home for their employees and their customers. And they called us.

In spite of those episodes (and by the way, I'd had the same experience with the same person, later, with my new partner in the business), we decided not to hold grudges, and to engage, and to see whether something good might come out of it. We never reminded him of the situation we'd been in. We tried to treat his employees and him the way we would like to be treated. For us that's normal, but that's not the model for everybody. Other people create barriers doing this.

And then there's the experience of the FAIR Institute, where I'm trying to create a community for the betterment of the entire industry. We're one of the main contributors in the FAIR community, but I know that we may not be a fit for everybody: there may be other complementary products from other competitors that are a better fit for customers at different stages. So we welcome them into the community, even at the risk that they come to our conference, where 90% of the people we invite are our customers. I'm inviting my competitors to participate. Guess what happens? They are exposed to my customers. For them it's like a honeypot.

And I'm willing to do it, because I think it can contribute to the benefit of the community. I also have faith that my product is good enough that I'm not going to be so easily replaced. And if they have a better solution for the customer's need in that moment, so be it. It's okay. And we can be friends.

Interviewer: And that competitors can be friends too.

Nick Sanna: Competitors can absolutely be friends.

The big temptation in the high-tech industry is wanting absolute domination, believing that yours is the only way, or the only good way, to solve that problem. And that's a big lie. The facets of needs are so different and so wide. There might be a different way to solve a problem, and in some cases a complementary one.

And when you develop a new market, as in our case, it really takes a village. Believing you can do it on your own, even by eliminating the competition, is a fallacy. It's a big temptation to try to overcome.

I'm at the point now where I want to respect people, because they may have intuitions equally as good as mine, and they may have something for me to learn from, so I don't want to underestimate them either. And if they're a better fit for what needs to be done, and you have the best intentions and the best outcomes for the customers at heart, then maybe you should recommend them. I've found myself in those situations.

It doesn't mean we're not competitive. We like to win, we like to outperform others, not because we want to demean them or put them down, but because we give it our best, and we've been ingenious in a very unique way, and we work really hard to solve a problem in the best way possible. It's almost as if we're more in competition with ourselves than with others. Just because we have a drive to succeed doesn't mean you need to hate others. For me, those two things are not antagonistic. They can go hand in hand.

Interviewer: And how you think about competitors?

Nick Sanna: EoC principles can help turn competitors into friends, because they may have ideas you didn't think about, they may serve customers in ways that you cannot reach, and they may help you build an industry that otherwise wouldn't come about if you were to do it alone.

Neighbors

Interviewer: How do your EoC values affect the way you engage with your neighbors, the people around your company?

Nick Sanna: When I think about neighbors, I often think about our partners. These are people who are not employees with us but who work with us a lot: distribution partners, technical partners. The way we interact with them is the same way we interact among ourselves. We don't make any distinction: the same quality of relationship we want to build among ourselves extends to them.

Sometimes it's natural and they embrace our sense of trying to live as a family. And in some cases you have to set the record straight. I've been in situations where partners (they're the big company, you're the small company) want to boss you around. Sometimes you need to say, time out. What are we trying to do here? Are we trying to partner among equals, to respect one another, understand one another deeply, embrace each other's mission and build something together? Or are you just trying to boss us around? Because that's not the kind of play we want. It's not going to work. We don't want to engage that way, and it will not make sense for us.

Interviewer: And neighbors?

Nick Sanna: Building relationships with neighbors has unexpected consequences sometimes. In one of our previous companies, we started in a co-working space, so we had to build relationships of camaraderie and respect, but also of support with one another. And that gave birth to hiring from one another, to new business ideas, and even to some weddings, because people got to know one another deeply, to the point where they started dating and got engaged and got married.

The community, and the FAIR Institute

Interviewer: What about community? Do you have any community outreach or engagement?

Nick Sanna: Yes. There are two forms I can think of.

In the latest iteration of my company, I built a community called the FAIR Institute. Our methodology to assess cybersecurity risk has become an international standard, and a big community has formed around it, to the point where we now have 18,000 members. It's a very big community, and it's global.

What's fun about the community is that it's member-driven. All the members are volunteers. We have 20 local chapters where people are protagonists. They come together (people from different companies, including competitors) and share their experiences with one another, to help one another, because they see themselves as facing similar adversaries; in this case threat actors, cyber criminals. They help one another without feeling like, I have some knowledge and I'll keep it for myself. So we created an environment where people really freely and willingly and proactively share with one another, in ways I've not seen very commonly.

I think the spirit we try to build a company on, the EoC principles, has permeated how people relate in this community too. For me, that's amazing to see. Yesterday I was here in Omaha, Nebraska, and we had our first meeting of people who are in similar roles in the industry here. Some of them knew one another, others were new to one another, and they decided to continue to meet and share best practices for the betterment of their own practices internally, in their own companies. Some of them were competitors, but they said we want to share and help one another in ways that otherwise wouldn't happen.

That's one side of community. Another example is collaboration with academia. We helped create new norms of how cybersecurity can be managed from the business perspective, not just the technical perspective. Many universities only teach courses on cybersecurity from the technical perspective. They don't teach courses that tell you what matters most: how do you translate technical signals into business impact, what are the things we need to focus on, how do you approach cybersecurity from the economic point of view? So there is a void in the industry.

What we have done with the FAIR Institute is open-source a lot of our standard materials, give them to academia, build curriculum and give it to those universities so they can build courses in cyber risk management, and allow students to come to our conferences for free. Where big companies have to pay big bucks to attend, these students can come and learn new skills, new expertise that will be very precious in their future careers.

Interviewer: Is FAIR a nonprofit?

Nick Sanna: FAIR is a nonprofit, yes. We created a nonprofit organization next to the for-profit company that pays my salary. It's a nonprofit in the state of Washington. The mission there is threefold. One, establish standards for the industry. Two, provide educational opportunities to learn about the standards. And three, networking, where people can share their expertise with one another, and also try to provide employment opportunities for people who develop the skills, and have them meet employers who may be looking for people with those skills. So we become matchmakers, in a sense.

The website of the community is fairinstitute.org. People have said, "Wait a minute, you're giving away a lot of your expertise in open source and turning it into a standard. Isn't there a risk that you're also opening up this expertise to your competitors?" And we said yes. One, because we believe in the betterment of the industry. But two, because we believe: let's create a bigger market. Let's solve the problem for everybody. And then, among the commercial companies that can apply those standards to develop products and solutions, we need to be the best ones applying it on the commercial side. But it's a fair game. If competitors are better than us: game on. Have them try their hand at it. Everybody needs to win on their merits. We don't want to limit our knowledge just to ourselves, but really contribute to the benefit of the entire industry.

Interviewer: And the community?

Nick Sanna: A sense of responsibility that we are not separate from the community: looking at the community with the eyes of, these are your brothers and sisters as well. And in the pursuit of your business, what can you do to help the community? Whether that's providing employment opportunities for young people in the community, helping people in need with some of the proceeds that we have, or providing educational opportunities for people who need to learn a trade. It gave me a sensitivity that I didn't have before.

The environment

Interviewer: Are there ways that you approach environmental concerns in your company that might be unique?

Nick Sanna: Not really in our company, because we work in a digital world, so we're a bit removed from environmental concerns. But we're trying to promote a harmonious environment, where people feel welcome in our settings, where the environment looks clean, professional and welcoming for the employees as well, so that they can be their best in the environment we set up for them.

Interviewer: And environmental concerns?

Nick Sanna: We are supposed to be stewards of the environment. Early in the EoC there were a lot of people who wanted to make sure that in our business practices we became good stewards of the environment, almost to the point where the environment gets better after encountering us in the pursuit of business, rather than the opposite.

Reputation

Interviewer: What would you say your company's reputation is in the industry?

Nick Sanna: Our current company: I would say we are very strong in innovating; we are out-innovating others. We are quite intense in terms of our purpose and our mission. I would say we are uncomfortably transparent and forthcoming about things, and uncomfortably seeking in relationships, because we want to go in depth and we're not content with superficial relationships.

For some people that's annoying. That's not normal. And it's not for everybody. Some employees say, this is too intense, this is too much. I'm not ready to let go, to open up and every day talk liberally about the good, the bad and the ugly, and deal with each other like brothers and sisters in the pursuit of a mission. They just want to be told what to do. And that doesn't work for us.

Red flags

Interviewer: Are there any red flags students should look out for when they're looking for a company to work for?

Nick Sanna: I think the new generation is very much in tune with trying to find out what the culture of a company is. When I started my job, we were lucky to get a job; any job we were considered for was an honor. Now I think the new generation is more choosy. They're trying to understand: is this a culture where I'll be able to flourish and be myself, and be okay with it? They ask questions we were not used to getting, and I think they're psychologically ready to qualify the employer as much as they're being qualified by the employer.

But here's what I'd look for. Hopefully you'll be exposed to multiple people in the company, and you can see how they behave. That's the first thing: how they behave with you. Are they taking a keen interest in you as a person, or are they treating you like a machine, like something that could be disposed of tomorrow? Do they take a keen interest in making sure there is a long-term future for you in this company, and in what ways? Are they interested in your personal development? Are they interested in understanding what else is going on in your life? Do they want to build a rapport with you, or just hire someone to get a job done, and that's it? I'd look into those things.

And then there are connections and social media. The best references come from checking around. There are tools like Glassdoor, but Glassdoor is not always a reliable source, because it can become a dumping ground for people who are upset with the company for various reasons. You don't get the balance of the good experiences, because people don't share the good experiences to the same degree. So you get the real story when you engage live with a few people who either work there or have worked there, and ask open-ended questions: how is it to work there? What's the culture really like, not as told in the PowerPoint deck, but as told by people who actually lived it?

Interviewer: When you're evaluating whether to take somebody on as a partner or a client, are there red flags you look for?

Nick Sanna: The red flag for me is always: can we partner? That's the first question we ask ourselves. And when I say can we partner, I mean, are they willing to partner the same way we'd like to partner? Because we want to build a real relationship. If they want to boss us around, it's not going to work, and we'll tell them so.

Or if they're not willing to share information. How we communicate information among partners is about expectation setting, information sharing, and so on. If we're not treating one another as an extension of one another, it's not going to work.

So: are they open to partnering, to collaborating, to engaging in depth? That's the number one thing I look at. And then the obvious, of course: will they be truthful? Is their heart in the right place? But typically, the biggest question for us is, can they be good partners, and can they partner in the ways we like to partner?

Legacy

Interviewer: You've been involved with the EoC for decades and with many companies. What do you see as your legacy as a member of the EoC?

Nick Sanna: I never really asked myself that question. I didn't think I was old enough to ask myself that question. But it's a very good one.

What comes to mind right away as the legacy is the notion of being an example: for my kids, and for the people I've interacted with in society as well: that you can put business and the common good in the same sentence. And I lived that. I wanted to live the dream where you can change the world through business, and I've experienced it every day.

It doesn't mean you can change the entire world at once, but one relationship at a time, one customer at a time. You can decide what that relationship will be, what quality of rapport you're going to build, and what quality of outcomes you're going to get out of it. And I wouldn't have it any other way. Modest examples of that are enough for me. It's very fulfilling.

So when I tell my kids, I lived my dream. Was it easy? No. Did I make compromises, and could my career have made more money in other ways? Maybe. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't even factor into my thoughts.

Interviewer: And legacy?

Nick Sanna: If I think of a legacy for the EoC, for many people it's been hope. Hope that a different world is possible, that we can be brothers and sisters not only in personal and family circles, but also in business communities. They can become places of encounter and of communion.

Five ways it looks different

Interviewer: What are five ways your business practices look different?

Nick Sanna: Let me think about five ways, in the context of my trajectory, in which the business is different.

The first is that I realized I could become a business person and drive good results without being a jerk. That's number one.

Two: I can go further together than alone.

Three: there is an ecosystem waiting to engage with you and help you out, if you allow it: whether that's employees, partners, academia or others. I was completely oblivious to that. I wasn't even thinking about it.

Four: probably building better products, because I've been listening more, and other people around me have been listening more, to the needs of the customers and of the market.

And fifth, in my case, helping many people find a way in life. Professionally, and also in their personal destinies, which improved because of the chances they were given as new employees or as interns, and because they discovered a way of life they otherwise would never have met.

Part Seven: Wealth, poverty and the common good

What peers make of it

Interviewer: Have you had experiences with peers in the industry who noticed the simplicity of your lifestyle and asked why you do it that way?

Nick Sanna: Yes. It's been more puzzling to them than anything. I don't think I've had a very negative reaction, because there are all kinds of CEOs and many extravagant people in many ways. But often it's puzzling to them, because it begs the question: why would you not buy yourself an amazing car? They all have amazing cars. And for me it's like, okay, I have a nice car, but the same car gets me from A to B while spending only a third or a fourth or a fifth of what they're spending on theirs.

That's my way of living poverty: to live in a way that doesn't embarrass my family, my kids, my employees and my customers, but that also suffices. That's a real lifestyle choice. And for me it gives me a lot of freedom as well, because I'm free of the need to compare myself to wealth standards, and free of those attachments.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Nick Sanna: There is a freedom there. And so it's very puzzling for them.

Let me say something that may sound ridiculous: you may not want to use this footage. I've been at many lunches and dinners where, among the CEOs, I was the only one who was not divorced. Because if you invest in relationship, you're going to spend more time with your family, and you don't overdo it to the point where you put your family relationship at risk. Whereas if business success is number one, then maybe you don't spend the weekend at home, because you can play golf with your customers and your investors instead of spending time with your family, spending time with the kids.

There was a moment of crisis a few years ago. One summer I was traveling a lot; I think I was overdoing it for work. And in the same day, I had two statements. One from my son: I was scolding him for something he had done, and he told me, "Why do you even care? You're never here anyway." And my wife, in a completely different situation the same day, told me, "Hey Nick, you know what? I'm getting used to being without you." And she told me this not in a judgmental way; she just told me matter-of-factly. You're never here, but I'm getting used to it. And you go, oh my God, this is a moment where I need to pay attention, and decide whether this is important to me, whether this is a relationship we need to care about or not.

So in that situation, I resigned from my job. I took the summer off. I learned how to kitesurf, to bond with my boys before they went to college, because I felt that if I didn't bond with them now, and they left for college, it was going to be game over in terms of our relationship. And I'm still married, happily married. I think that turned things around for my family. So that's another way of prioritizing what matters to me, and living out the value. I think the EoC had a lot to do with it.

Poverty

Interviewer: Lorna Gold talks about poverty as more than financial: poverty of purpose, of place in society, of relationship. How have your EoC principles helped alleviate poverty in those different ways?

Nick Sanna: What I think about poverty is that it's also detachment: detachment from things, from situations, and from people. You can be a poor person, but if you are attached to something that could help another person, something you may not need even as a poor person, that's also not living poverty. Because you're attached to it, you want it for yourself only, and you're not willing to have other people partake of it. I'm being extreme in that example.

For me, poverty is, as we said yesterday, being conscious about which things I need and which I don't need any more of. As I said, shopping at Nordstrom Rack and TJ Maxx versus going to the designer store, and not embarrassing my employees and my family by how I dress in the role I have as a family member and as an executive in high tech: that's how I live poverty.

But also in the role: I'm not attached to the role. Because you can be attached to a role, be rich in your persona, and create a barrier between you and others. There's nothing beneath me: I'll go into a room and clean it up if there's a meeting happening afterwards, and leave it as they would like to find it, not being attached to my role and thinking this is somebody else's job.

Another example: we have a family apartment in Europe, because we're from Europe originally, and we never sold it. We always rented it out to help pay off the mortgage there, because maybe we're going to go back to Europe.

Over the years I found that it was very important for my wife to have a place in Europe to meet the family. She said, "Listen, we are 50 years old. We keep camping out at our cousins' and friends' houses. It would be good to have our own place, and also to welcome other people, so we can reciprocate for them."

And for me it's like, okay, I'm going to have less income. But it's important to build relationships with family and friends, and it was important for her. There's a whole dimension of family life and friendships that we sacrificed all those years because we lived in the States. Now she said it's important. So: detaching from profit optimization, from paying off that mortgage with that rent, and spending some money to invest in family relationships.

And what I'm realizing now is that when people go there (we used to live in Paris) I had a nephew who was looking for a job and didn't have a place to stay and couldn't afford it in Paris; he stayed at our place. Another one who just got engaged. A cousin of my kids. Another nephew who was passing by and didn't have money for a hotel, and hosted his girlfriend while going to visit his family in Rome; they passed by there.

For me, that's also poverty: being detached, and allowing them to enjoy it. It may not seem like much, but we have those debates. My wife says, "Nick, I don't know how to feel sometimes about opening up all those things, because people could also not respect the things in our home. It's our place, our home away from home." But then realizing, no, this is for them as well. So let's discern every single situation and see what makes sense to help others.

That's really how we live poverty: with that detachment. It's not just for us; it can also be for others, in whatever you do.

Redistribution

Interviewer: It's strange for business people to think about their role as helping to redistribute wealth, but you see it again and again in the EoC. Can you talk about that?

Nick Sanna: I can't speak in terms of the business I'm helping right now, because it's not an EoC business, so we don't have the distribution of profits for the sake of the poor as part of our charter, the way an EoC business would.

But in terms of the money I make, I can decide how to distribute my own personal profits. And my board there is my wife. We have discussions about what to do with it: what do we need to make sure we have for retirement, so we're not a burden? What do we need to make sure the kids finish college? And then how much do we really need afterwards, and how much can we afford to give to others?

So my board at home is with my wife, to decide how to allocate those profits. And I'm fortunate that my wife abides by a lot of the same principles. I think she's naturally better at creating a game of unity, and at discussing these things. Whereas I want a quick solution: I want a discussion, but I want it quick. And

she says, wait a minute, we need to think it through more, there might be a few things that need to be considered here. That's a great dynamic.

If I can add an example as well: it doesn't mean always being completely selfless and living miserably. I'll give you an example from this week. Our kids are young adults now, and they come and visit us. One of my kids said, "Hey Dad, we're coming to New York" (he's coming with his girlfriend) "do you have anything planned in store for us?" He's basically asking me in indirect terms whether we're doing something as an experience.

And I knew that he and his girlfriend had spoken in the past about going to see a show. So I told my wife, it's Christmas, why don't we go and see the Rockettes in Midtown? And my wife said, sounds like a great idea. Then she calls me back later and says, "Nick, for all of us, it's over a thousand bucks. How do you feel about that?"

So we had a discussion. We ended up debating it, and concluded that actually it was probably a good family experience. Typically in the past we would have done a trip with them over the holidays, which was actually much more expensive. We would probably have spent the money in other ways anyway. And it was family building; it was a moment that was important, to be there and provide a good experience for the kids. So we decided to spend the money on those tickets.

So it's not always about being cheap for the sake of being cheap, but about being attentive to what we believe is a positive experience for the family. You've got to have discernment in deciding how to allocate your own profits with your own board.

Interviewer: And you could afford that because you buy your shoes off the Nordstrom Rack, right?

Nick Sanna: Absolutely. Especially shoes from the clearance section.

What actually helps

Interviewer: From your own experience, how have you seen the EoC lived out differently in other parts of the world?

Nick Sanna: I haven't been exposed to much of the EoC in other parts of the world, but what always impresses me is how big the impact can be from small gestures.

Let me use an example. I remember an experience from Latin America, where there was a lady who suddenly became a widow. Her husband had been the breadwinner, and in that country she didn't have a pension or retirement, so she was basically living off handouts from the community, until somebody who was knowledgeable about the EoC asked her, "What are you good at?" And they discovered she was good at sewing. And they bought her a sewing machine. Long story short, she started selling her services as a seamstress, and she built a business out of it, which took care of her livelihood and eliminated her situation of dependency.

So what I see (and I see a lot of examples like this in the world) is that small relationships like that can make a big difference in people's lives. You don't need to think about a big business idea to be an EoC entrepreneur. The EoC spirit can spark fertile ground for changing a person's life, or people's lives, or a

community's life, by understanding what their needs are as well as understanding people's talents, and then finding how to connect those things and perhaps give them a little bit of support, the spark to make it happen.

For me, that's the opposite of what I learned in economic development. In economic development, when I started 30 years ago, it was about a lot of funds going into building a factory in a country, producing things that people there didn't actually need, and meanwhile a few people were parking all the money, and making zero impact on the ground. Whereas this one-on-one relationship really made a difference.

So what I've seen in other countries is a lot of those micro experiences that are making a difference with very little money. Often people say the EoC may not have collected or given a lot of money in terms of the profits that businesses share, but the impact, I think, has been disproportionate. The money really goes to support new initiatives that solve real problems, because of the relationship, because the needs are very clearly identified.

Interviewer: How has the EoC influenced economics?

Nick Sanna: I think there's a kind of miracle that happens in the EoC in multiplying the effect of dollars, or any other currency.

Because of the relationships that get built between people in need and people who have resources to share, people are very responsible in using those resources. And they often say, "I don't need those resources anymore, so stop giving, because you lifted me up and I can take care of myself."

The resources put at their disposal (whether that's training, the gift of a machine, or a job opportunity) have the right impact, an impact that a handout may not have. So it has a lasting effect in many cases, which makes every dollar shared, or every moment of your time shared with somebody else, of the highest effectiveness.

Interviewer: What if a firm that gives financial advice took two Fridays a month to advise small savers rather than whales, people who can put in $50 a week? You don't have to change what you do; you can help the poor with accounting by giving a day or two a month.

Nick Sanna: I think that's a brilliant idea, and something that could be very easily implemented.

I was thinking that microcredit initiatives can be great EoC businesses. There has been a very successful bank in the Philippines that had a microcredit business. But that takes a long-lasting commitment to the territory, because you're building relationships and communities. You lend people money with very little interest, and the repayment rates (these are underprivileged people who usually aren't backed, who struggle to keep jobs), but they had a higher repayment rate, because the lending is done through circles or networks of trusted relationships. The community and the group of people surrounding them supports them with advice and talent, but also: you don't want to let your friends down. These people repay because they basically got the money from people who became their friends.

That's a model that can work, but it requires really long-rooted and long-lasting relationships in the community. Those would be amazing businesses. And again, they don't require a lot of money, because sometimes these people don't need a lot of money to break through.

I remember one initiative where I gave some of my personal money to finance an activity in Haiti. Some of the communities there were in the cattle business, but they had a problem with insecurity: people would come at night and steal the cattle, or kill the cattle and eat it. They just needed to build a wall around their property to keep the cows safe at night. They didn't need a big investment, but a small investment allowed that business to prosper, and then it became a shelter for other people in the community.

So it doesn't take a lot to make a real difference.

Interviewer: If you could start any EoC company, what would be an interesting one to create? Something you see a need for.

Nick Sanna: The role model for me (and this is not to take advantage of the situation) is what you do here in Omaha: revitalizing old buildings and old apartments, and using people who are in need of jobs or in need of attention, and giving them a chance to lift themselves up through work. And then the result of that is renting out at very affordable rents to families who otherwise couldn't afford to live downtown.

For me, that exemplifies what the EoC should be. You have a social purpose. And every single step is a giving act, and it makes a difference in the local community and in local society. In your case, it's a multiplying effect at every corner. For me, that's amazing.

I feel like I'm living the EoC only in a partial way, because we live a lot of the principles, but we don't necessarily share our profits with people in need; that's down to our own personal initiative. And our goods: yes, they help humanity by connecting people safely in digital things, but do they have an immediate social role you can catalog as such? Probably not.

So for me, community-focused property enterprises like yours are a real role model.

Agents of communion

Interviewer: You saw Pope Francis in 2017. In the talk he gave to us, he called EoC entrepreneurs agents of communion. How have you seen yourself as an agent of communion?

Nick Sanna: The way "agent of communion" resonates with me is that you're trying to build meaningful relationships with everybody you encounter. And when I say meaningful relationships, I mean relationships where we understand one another (as much as we can, given the time we have with one another) in terms of our interests, aspirations and needs, and where we build a relationship at that level, where we can support one another, help one another, and maybe partner with one another to help other people. Doing this all the time. And creating environments where people can come together and build family.

In our company we like to say we're building a family, not just a team. We care for one another at a deep personal level, and for me that's building community, with everybody I encounter. For me that was a very natural thing.

He also challenged us in that meeting. He said, "You also need to be careful not to be like those philanthropists who make money and give the money away without building enough relationship with the people they give it to. That's not enough." And he used the image of the good shepherd: the good shepherd may have a sheep on his back because the sheep is tired, and you can smell the sheep on yourself. That's how close you need to be to people to understand them deeply.

For me, that was an examination of conscience. Am I close to doing that? Am I like that shepherd who has the smell of the sheep on him? And I have to be honest: in that moment, no. There are many relationships where that's not the case. There are a lot of people I know where maybe there's more that can be done. So it was a very meaningful encounter.

Interviewer: He also challenged EoC members to create a world with no more victims. Do you see yourself being able to play a role in that?

Nick Sanna: Absolutely. Because you can make a lot of profits and use suppliers who mistreat their employees, or not treat your own employees well. That's not the right spirit. You create dysfunction and conflict, and the opposite of communion, in the pursuit of what may be a noble goal, which may be to distribute money.

That's a problem that philanthropy sometimes has. Very successful entrepreneurs make a lot of money, and it's a good thing in America that many entrepreneurs want to give their money away before they die. It beats keeping it in the family forever, which happens in many other countries. It's a noble thing. But in the process of making that money: did we create dysfunction along the way, by exploiting people, including the environment, and creating conflict?

That's the question we face. That's why I say it's a lifestyle. It's not about giving money. Giving money should be a byproduct of the lifestyle. You cannot be dysfunctional by design in one aspect of it and then feel that it's okay just because you gave money away.

Industries that harm

Interviewer: He said there are cases where the cigarette industry funds cancer research though it causes the cancer, and gaming corporations help with gambling addiction though they are responsible for it. Eventually, he said, we may see makers of weapons building hospitals.

Nick Sanna: I can speak about an example, a small one.

One day a family member got a new job offer. He was looking for a new job, and he said, "Oh my God, this is my dream job. I'm going to be a product manager, the company pays 30% more, there are all these celebrities on the board." And he was naming celebrities left and right. Very impressive, okay.

And then the call ended, and I thought: well, he didn't tell me what company it was. So in the next conversation I said, "What does your company do?" And he was a little bit embarrassed. "It's a marketplace, like Shopify." But what kind of product? "It's for cannabis products."

He was probably expecting a big reaction from me. I didn't say much. And then I said, so what does this marketplace do? "Well, we have this marketplace where we can point you to the nearest dispensary, give you all these products for the various treatments they can be used for, and we have this amazing code of conduct to prevent people from abusing it."

And I said, okay. How do you feel about it? Do you believe in the product? Because as a product manager, your job is going to be to drive consumption. More business, more consumption. And there might be legitimate consumption, and there might be abuse created.

He said, "No, no, I read the code of conduct, it's rock solid, it's great."

And I said, okay. But listen, it's almost like me taking a job in the weapons industry and thinking there are legitimate purposes for it (defense, and so on) but also knowing there are others. Do you believe in the product, in the conception of it?

And I left it at that. Because even if I use the example of the cigarette industry: they have a lot of programs to avoid addiction, but guess what? The salespeople market to young people outside of clubs, underage kids, and that's part of the business plan. Do you think salespeople here won't try to make a buck the same way?

And he said, "I didn't think of that." And we left it at that.

Long story short: he calls a week later and says, "I got a different job. It's actually much better, and it pays even more. And it's a product I believe in." He was appreciative: I heard this many months later, in a comment from somebody else. He had been expecting a big reaction from the family, and he didn't want to share what he was doing because we would judge the situation.

For me, living the EoC also means not judging, but also making them think about what kind of future you want to build. What kind of outcomes do you want to create? Do you believe in those? Is that your purpose? For me it was not to tell him it was right or wrong, but for him to think it through. That was, hopefully, my gift to him in that moment: to make him think about it and understand what his purpose is, and what kind of world he wants to build: a world that maybe creates systemic dependencies and addictions in the pursuit of making a buck, or not.

Interviewer: An early job like that would also turn off some future employers.

Nick Sanna: I told him that. I said, listen, some employers would value that and think it's cool. Some might say it's off limits. Is it okay to have that on your resume or not?

Part Eight: Foundations

Faith

Interviewer: Does your faith play a strong role in your commitment to the EoC?

Nick Sanna: For me it's interesting, because my meeting with the Focolare and the EoC was a conversion into believing in it. It was a faith experience for me. I was in a very materialistic mindset. I went to a business school where they inflate your head, telling you how to manage the world and how to manipulate others for your own purposes. And I had to spend many years undoing those thoughts and behaviors that you are taught. That faith experience really helped me undo all of that, all those learnings. Over the years, I'm still working on it.

It takes courage, faith, and love of God. Many times you make bets on a relationship, on an act of love, on a gesture that may be anti-economical. And you often find yourself praying: God, I'm doing this for you. You'd better take care of me, because this may be a money-losing opportunity. You'd better cover my back. Show me your providence in dealing with it. So you're ready to engage with it, ready to lose it all, but also trusting that good will come out of it.

Without a life of faith, I would say you wouldn't be able to have the strength and commitment to be consistent with this lifestyle. There are too many challenges, too many things pointing you in the wrong direction and showing you alternative models. It would be very easy to follow the current.

Providence

Interviewer: And the idea of providence, what does that mean to you?

Nick Sanna: When I think about providence, it's the idea that there is a God who loves us all and understands our needs, and that when we do things for his sake, eventually he'll take care of us.

It's not pretending, or acting: I'll ask and you shall give me. It's that if I put my faith in Him when it might not seem reasonable, or when I'm being very generous in a particular situation, that will help ensure the situation comes to a good ending, and that He will do his part in meeting the needs of the situation.

Interviewer: Many people in the Focolare and the EoC talk about providence, about things working out in surprising ways. How would you explain what providence means? And do you have stories where you have seen it at work?

Nick Sanna: I'm going to speak about providence with an example.

There was a downturn (I think it was one of the financial crises, it may have been 2008) where we had to do a reduction in force. It was the only way to save the business, and very painful. It's the most painful thing you can do in business. You engage people with a promise: we're going to do great, this is an adventure, we're going to do this for a long time together. And then you realize, after trying everything, that customers are not buying right now, they're tightening their belts, and our income is not what we thought it would be. After trying to save money in ten different ways, the last resort before closing the doors is reducing our cost and having to let people go.

I remember meeting with the management team and saying, we want to do it in a way that puts the person at the forefront. For us, that meant recognizing it was a tough hiring environment, so we needed to give these people more severance than is normally done. Our formula was two weeks per year served, and in many cases we thought that wasn't enough to allow these people to recover and find another job. So we came up with a plan to give people more severance, in a company that had very little cash.

I had to go and sell this to the board. And I remember when I went to the board, they looked at me and said, "Are you crazy?" And I had to say, yes, I was crazy about trying to do something crazy for these people. For me it was providence, really: God, I'm doing this for you, you'd better make this work. What happened is that we did it, and we didn't go under. We parted ways with these people, they were super grateful, and we were able to weather the storm and eventually recover.

And I think a year and a half later, I was interviewing a gentleman. I asked him, "Well, why do you want to come and work here?" And he told me, "I want to come to work here because I believe in your product. But also I believe in how you treat people." What do you mean by that? "Well, I have a habit of interviewing people you fired." And you're like, oh my God, you really do that? "Yeah, I go on LinkedIn and see people you parted ways with, people you may have let go. I call them and see what they tell me about you." Whoa. Okay, so what did they tell you? And he told me, "Well, they told me that you had to do a reduction in force. They told me how you treated them. And that's exactly why I want to come work here."

Another situation of providence: we had a big customer, a major telco firm in the United States: many years ago, so I can say the name, it was AT&T. The project leader told us, "Hey, our budget didn't get approved for your project, but we still have a big need. And if you don't do it, it's going to affect us personally, because we're not going to be able to meet our objectives."

And we're like, wait a minute. I'm the small company, you're the big company. You tell me you don't have money, but if I don't do this for you, you're going to have a problem with your own performance and it's going to affect your career? Tough to believe. But at some point we met as a team and said, what are we going to do here?

It was an act of faith, and for me it was an act of providence, in saying: God, I'm going to trust this person. I believe this person is telling me the truth, and I'm going to do it for the right reasons. So we went back to this person and said, we're going to take care of you. We extended the license to our product for a while longer (it was several months), and said, when your budget gets approved, come back and make us right. But we did it knowing that we were ready to lose the money. We're going to do this; it's the right thing to do.

A year and a half later, we had forgotten about it as well. And they come back and say, "Hey, Nick, we finally got the budget. It took much longer than we anticipated, but it got approved. Where can we buy? Give us the instructions."

These are my experiences of how we live providence in business. You take a big risk, and it's an act of faith. It can cost you. But you also do it for the right reason, believing that God will not be outdone in generosity and will take care of you.

One relationship at a time

Interviewer: You said that you change the world one relationship at a time. Could you say more about that, and how you came to understand it?

Nick Sanna: It's been an evolution, with a lot of examples. For me, Mother Teresa of Calcutta always spoke about changing the world one person at a time, and change starts with you in the present moment. Same thing with the founder of the Focolare: the one thing that matters is the present moment, and trying to discern what is the most important thing to do. And if you're one-on-one with a person, being 100% with that person. That's when you change the world, because that's what you're empowered to do.

If you think about changing the world in the future, as an aspiration, and you're not focusing on the present and making a change in the present, that future may never come. And thinking about changing an entire world by yourself: you don't have the means to do that, so you can get discouraged. Whereas one person at a time, building a relationship with the people around you in any given moment: that's reachable. That's feasible. And it depends on me, in determining what quality of relationship we're going to build.

For me that was very fulfilling, and it was also an antidote to a stressful life. People say, "You have a very demanding job. How are you not losing your mind, stressed by the many demands of it?" And my premise is: in any given moment, I have one thing I can do. So let me do that well, and then figure out in future moments what the priorities are, and be at peace with what I can do there.

It took a long time to be at peace with that, because as a younger individual I wanted to see a disproportionate impact from all my actions in life. And then I discovered that probably the most empowering thing was the present moment, and living it out, trying to love and care for others in the present moment.

Interviewer: Business students hear about networking as a formal thing, shaking hands and making uncomfortable small talk. How do you see networking?

Nick Sanna: I can tell you what makes me uncomfortable: engaging with people and only keeping it at a business relationship, where we don't understand the context in which this person operates. What's happening in their life. They have a family, they have kids. So I always look for that.

Sometimes people may not be ready to talk about this: "Why? We're here to network, power lunches, power dinners." But I always make it a point to also understand the context in which they operate, what's happening with them as a person, what's behind their motivations and what's driving them, what issues they face. Because only then can you build a real relationship. Otherwise it becomes just a business relationship. It's superficial, and you miss a lot.

I think it's not even good for business, because you don't understand the real motivation, the real needs of the person, and you cannot really partner with them or enter into a deeper business relationship. Because we are one person. Only looking at a very small dimension of someone's life doesn't allow us to go in depth and have a real impact in each other's lives.

The present moment

Interviewer: If you didn't practice the EoC way, would you go about work-life balance any differently than you do now?

Nick Sanna: I was on the wrong path. At the beginning I was a role model for the most efficient way to make a buck. Everything I liked to do was about efficiency, to the point of "get out of my way, I'm going to find the quickest path." I think I would have been even stronger in that. I would have grown that dimension disproportionately, and relationships probably would not have factored in as much. That's for sure. That was my upbringing: always looking for highly efficient ways of making decisions and getting to results. And that's something I'm still fighting in myself, to make sure it doesn't take over all the other dimensions of my life. Because the EoC is something so personal; it's something you almost tie to your heart.

Interviewer: Do you think you work harder because you're an EoC entrepreneur, that you work longer? Or do you think you'd work the same amount if you weren't committed to the EoC?

Nick Sanna: I'm not sure I would subscribe to that framing in terms of deciding how much I need to work. What I'm trying to understand is: what is the right thing to do right now? So I discern: if we need to launch this product and solve it in a certain timeframe, how much work is needed? But then at some point it's, okay, I need a break on the weekend. At what point do I drop the pen and shut down my cell phone and spend time with the family? That discernment happens in a way that, if I didn't live the EoC, probably wouldn't happen.

My kids know that I know how to shut down my phone. I purposely don't have a watch, because I want to live in the present moment and be 100% with you in this moment and not be distracted by other things.

The same works for my calendar. I'm calendar-driven, and I try to manage my calendar with a balance built into it. I have a personal assistant, and she puts in follow-up time, rest time, weekend time. She blocks the calendar to make sure I achieve a certain balance in my life. And we do it together: we discern together what the right thing is. Do I sometimes cross over? There are always exceptions, one way or the other. But I'm trying to find a balance, because otherwise work would be the only thing in life. Work can fill my entire life, my entire day, but I know that wouldn't be the right thing to do.

Work and rest

Interviewer: When it comes to finding a love for work, and an ability to do work for long periods with deep focus, what should college students be doing to become better at working?

Nick Sanna: I mentioned the present moment before. People need to understand that the commodity they have least of in their life is probably time. So how are you going to spend your time? Are you going to spend it on valuable things, or on loud noise and all the impulses you have (including social media, email, phone, other interests) polluting your life so you're not able to focus on getting done the things that might be very important to you, whether it's a personal thing or a work activity?

For them to come to the realization that they have the power to make the most of their time is, I find for many of them, a revelation. They are more the victims of whatever is thrown at them, and then they realize they can reorient and reprioritize what matters. They have that power, and they don't know it.

Interviewer: When you sit down and work for a couple of hours at a time, what are some things you do so that you can stay focused, get the job done, and not be distracted?

Nick Sanna: Right now we're doing an interview: I shut down my phone. I put it on airplane mode. I don't carry a watch, because I already have a phone that tells me the time, and when I used to have a watch, I used to look at the time and have the time control me, and not be fully present, thinking about my next thing.

So I've found some tricks in terms of how to manage my time. I'm proactive in managing my calendar. If this week I need to get these things done, including working out, taking care of myself, and not just others; eating, sleeping, meeting customers, training people, writing reports for the board: how do I fit it all in? It's a continuous adjustment, but I allow that planning to take care of the big rocks, so that the small rocks, the small things that come up day to day, don't take over and make you forget the big rocks. You've got to be good at planning that. Otherwise, distraction will take over.

Interviewer: Do you have any practices with your wife that help keep that relationship strong?

Nick Sanna: For me it was blocking time on my calendar. One day of the weekend (for me it's Saturday) is blocked off completely. I'm not going to do any work, because I need my brain to rest, and to be with the family doing family stuff. That might be a date night with my wife; it used to be spending time with the kids, who are now empty-nesters; now it's meeting people in the community, finding things that are restful.

And for my wife: one thing I didn't do enough for many years was spending time with her. Because she also has her own aspirations, her own projects, and she needs time. She's someone who, unlike me (I like to make decisions quickly, even at the cost of making mistakes; I'm comfortable with that), she's not. She wants to deliberate. She needs time to talk to me.

So I make sure that during meals in the evenings, when I show up at the table, there's no phone at the table, there's no media at the table, so that we can actually talk. And on the weekends we have time where we can talk about family situations, about what's going on in our lives. For me, that's an act of love, because my tendency would be to come up with quick decisions, including for the family, and she says, "Wait a minute, I want to talk about it."

Our relationship was strained for a while, because I didn't make time. She felt that we could never get to the bottom of things because we didn't have time. She's a good person; she could rationalize it: "Oh, Nick has obligations at work, and it's okay." But at some point it became frustrating, because she felt we were never resolving things. It was always like Groundhog Day: the same things happen over and over, and we never discuss them.

Now I've learned (hopefully through experience, age, and a few kicks in the butt reminding me) that making that time is really precious. That time with my wife and the family is as important as time at work. It deserves to be protected in my calendar, and you've got to make it a priority.

A morning habit

Interviewer: Do you have any personal habits that help you keep grounded?

Nick Sanna: Starting the day with meditation, meditating on scripture on an everyday basis. That's important, because for me it's like tuning an instrument: aligning yourself with the right tune, and making sure that tune permeates your thinking and influences your heart throughout the day. I think it's key for me, and it really keeps me honest.

Starting the day with quiet time, doing meditation and finding time for prayer, is key to making sure your soul is in tune with the EoC principles. Because it's very easy to get out of tune. There are a lot of things that others want to put around you, things that may sound attractive: business, a sale we need to make, amazing customers. Some of these things can take over your life if your soul is not tuned well, and can take a disproportionate amount of time and importance in your life. So those practices (meditation and prayer) are paramount to making sure I'm in tune with what I'm trying to live.

Interviewer: I don't want to get too personal, but when you read a scripture passage, how do you meditate on it? What do you ask yourself?

Nick Sanna: Wow, you're worse than my priest.

The way I try to do it: first of all, I start my day by trying to be silent, and by starting with a moment of being grateful to have another day to live, and to make the most of it, and to try to live it for the glory of God and for the betterment of humanity. That's how I start. Thank you for giving me another chance, another opportunity. I want to live it for you, Lord. So give me the light to do that in every moment. That's the first intention.

By now it's almost automatic. It's almost like not having breakfast if I don't do it.

Then I read a passage of scripture (typically the daily readings) and meditate on it, reflecting on what it means for my life in the present moment, what is inspiring me. Often it's almost like doing an examination of conscience: in what ways is this passage compelling me to live out my day? In some cases it's provocative. Ooh, I need to think more about this situation. I was thinking about going about it this way, but this passage is telling me I'm probably going the easy way and I've got to think harder about it.

So for me it's an examination of conscience. Typically it's anywhere between 15 minutes and half an hour. Without doing that, I feel I run the risk of going back to old tendencies, of rushing through things, of being the efficient guy who goes for efficiency versus purpose.

Interviewer: How does that time of reflection in the morning set you up for the rest of the day?

Nick Sanna: Like anything in life, if you have a stated goal and a purpose, the likelihood of achieving that purpose is higher. It doesn't guarantee success, because we're human beings and we get distracted and sometimes we focus on other things and fall in love with the next shiny thing. Your soul may not always be centered on the right things. But it increases the odds of living in a certain way.

Interviewer: For the daily readings (this is a technical question), do you have an app you use?

Nick Sanna: I go to the USCCB daily readings, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. You can have it in writing or you can have audio, and sometimes they also have a reflection that comes with it. It's usccb.org/dailyreadings. That's what I use.

At work

Interviewer: At work, in a sales meeting, how do your relationship with God and your relationship with yourself affect those moments?

Nick Sanna: I'm sure it affects your mindset when you apply yourself to something and say, I want to live the day for it. It has an influence. As I said before, the chances of being centered on that are higher. It doesn't guarantee success.

In a sales meeting, often it's about understanding. A sales meeting may be about how we engage with our customers. Often, for me, it's about challenging the status quo. The status quo may be that we don't have a deep enough relationship with a customer, or we're speaking to a low-level person and we need to get to the boss and find a compelling way to get there. Or maybe somebody needs encouragement, or a kick in the butt, because they're not doing enough prospecting: they like to close deals but they don't like to prospect, they find it boring, it's a chore. So you need to find a way to explain the importance of it.

But I always try to focus on the task at hand while being respectful of the person. Because if you're just about the task and you treat the person like a mechanism, like a machine, then it becomes a very dehumanizing experience. They feel like, okay, I could be replaced by a machine; he only cares about the results, he doesn't care about me. So I try to keep that in mind.

Does it mean that I say a bunch of prayers throughout the day? No. But there are moments where I may do something that brings me satisfaction or feels very fulfilling, and there's a sentence I often say during the day: "It's for you, Lord. For you. I want to do this moment for you." Just to remind me that I'm not doing it only for myself. For you, Lord, in this person, in this group of people. It's a simple little prayer that I say sometimes. I'm not a guy who prays a lot; I'm not about multiplying prayers. I'm into small acts like this.

Family

Interviewer: How has your family responded to your decision to run business according to EoC values?

Nick Sanna: It's interesting. My family, especially my spouse: she's the one who keeps me in check . Because my tendency may be to be the efficient manager in some situations, and she says, "Well, is this the right way of dealing with the situation?" Or if my working hours or my travel become excessive and I'm neglecting other parts of my life, like spending time with the children or with the family, she's there to help me rebalance it.

So the relationship with my spouse: she understands the quality of relationship we're trying to develop in our family as well. It's a continuum. She keeps me honest, telling me when I may be leaning too much on one side or the other, when one dimension of my life becomes excessive and is starving other parts. That's one very important relationship, probably the most important relationship in my life.

And with my kids, I've been both accused and praised for my behavior. In some cases they kept me honest as well, because I was overdoing it in terms of working hard. But you can get very passionate about innovation. Sometimes it's like being a musician: you're on to something and you forget to eat and sleep, because you've got to finish your score. Same thing in business. You're on to something, you want to finish your business plan, or you have an idea for a new product, and hours don't count anymore, and other things get neglected. So they try to make sure you don't lose your mind and stay healthy.

In other cases, they were surprised: "Oh, you didn't check your phone for two days. We're on vacation. Wow. Okay, we understand the demanding nature of your job, but you also know how to take a break and spend time with the family when you need to."

So I've been accused of both. That's the balance I'm trying to achieve. They keep me honest, and I need to make sure I listen to them, because they're the eyes behind my back that I don't have myself sometimes. I'm very grateful for that.

Interviewer: Do they ever think you're too generous with money?

Nick Sanna: Yes. Because I've made a big commitment, in a personal way; it's always a personal call as well. In some cases they've felt that we had been very generous, and in some cases borderline, and maybe not responsible in certain things.

But again, that's where discernment is needed. I need to discern it too: does it make sense? Is it reasonable? Am I really doing too much or not? I also want to make sure I don't have tunnel vision. I don't want to feel that I'm the only measure of what is right or what is wrong, so hearing from other people who understand the game we're trying to play, and listening to them, is very precious in the discernment process.

There have been situations where we lent money to other people in the community where there was no certainty of return. In some cases the money didn't come back, and that was okay. But it's all in the dialogue. I try to respect the relationship with my wife around our personal money. I discuss it with her: hey, there's a person in need.

For example, there's a person in the community where I live in New York who is a recent immigrant. He and his three kids were living in a house with three bedrooms, and there were about 15 people in that house. They needed to find an apartment, and they didn't have money for a down payment. He works in a factory, and I think what he's paid is exploitation in New York: he can't afford it. So a few of us put the money down for his down payment. I don't know if he's going to be able to repay it, but that's okay. Discussing it with my wife, we felt it was the right thing to do to help them. So it's in that dynamic that we try to understand what is right to do or not.

Interviewer: You've talked about the game you play. How do you see the game, and how is that different from the way business is taught in business schools?

Nick Sanna: In business school, they teach you how to be a highly effective and productive individual and manager. What is the shortest way to accomplish a certain result?

And almost never in my education (at that time, this was probably 30 years ago) did we have a class on how to behave, or on ethics. I think now some of that happens, though sometimes it feels bolted on to a program. But all the emphasis is on maximization of outcomes, economic outcomes, and not societal or personal relationship outcomes. Those are not factored in at all.

So we had to learn on the spot how to apply EoC principles in everyday life, because I have not been part of courses where you're taught that. We had to experiment as we went, put our heart into it, and figure out how to do it.

Interviewer: How have other people, outside your family, responded to the way you practice business? Have people found it surprising?

Nick Sanna: With my family there was a big contrast. My parents at one point disinherited me, because they felt that I was irresponsible: I was sharing a lot of the things I had in a way they felt was too liberal and too generous.

And only after many years did they realize: okay, we have a nice house, our kids are going to college, we actually go on vacation, we're living quite a comfortable life. We didn't starve the family in the process while helping others. So at some point it became reasonable to them, even though in many decisions they probably would have said, think about yourself first, your family first, and then maybe at the end think about others. But for me, having that continuous discernment about helping others in the process was always natural. It took many years for them to come and see: okay, you have a car, and your kids get to go to good colleges.

But we have rules as well. I told my kids: I'm paid very well for my job, and we help others, but I also want to teach you the value of money and responsibility. So I told them, hey, we have great schools in Virginia. You've got to go to state schools; I'm not paying for out-of-state schools. But if you want to do grad school, I'm willing to pay for it and invest, if you feel you're going to specialize in something that requires going out of state.

And at some point, with my wife, we decided to put the kids on a budget. We were in quite a well-to-do neighborhood, and all the kids there were spoiled, having everything at their disposal. A PlayStation comes out, everybody gets one. So one year, I remember, when they were early teenagers, we decided to augment their stipend and give them a budget. We told them the good news: we've quadrupled your weekly allowance. But now you're going to buy your own clothes, you're going to buy your own toys, and all the things you don't require for school.

And it's amazing what it did for their sense of responsibility. Suddenly, if they wanted to buy a new PlayStation, they had to sell the old one. If they wanted to buy some clothing, they went online to look for discounts. So it was a little trick for us to instill a sense of responsibility, and to have them feel responsible about the value of goods and money and how to deal with it.

Interviewer: Did you have ways of trying to teach your children the art of loving, or skills like that, in the family?

Nick Sanna: One tool we used (you've probably heard it from others as well) is that we used to have the Cube of Love at home. We used to roll the Cube of Love almost every day. Every face of the cube was one of the aspects of the art of loving: be the first to love; love the difficult one, meaning the people you don't like, it was in a kid's language; always start again. That was one way of doing it.

Another way was being explicit about some of the things we were doing. Sometimes I would share my experiences from work, and they would look at me and say, "Why are you sharing this with us?" For me it was about giving them exposure to what real life is about: the kinds of decisions we need to make, and why we make them. Often they didn't know what to say, because it sounded like something bigger than their own experience in school. But they were always listening, and trying to make sense of it.

And I see now that they are very sensitive to a certain lifestyle in their own personal lives. They may not be involved explicitly in the Focolare movement or the EoC, but they are not attached to things. They're still trying to find how to relate to the wider world and how much to give, but they are very open to others, and generous to others in their own ways, and not attached to things. I think that's the biggest impediment to living as a community: the "me, me, me" that keeps others at arm's length. They don't have that in them. That's the indirect influence I think, and hope, it may have had on them.

Educating the next generation

Interviewer: You mentioned a certain kind of business acumen you see as necessary to be successful. What does that acumen include?

Nick Sanna: I can tell you what I'm facing right now with the business students we are hiring. Often they don't have a discipline of work, and they're very scared. It's almost as if they live in a world that's very multitasking, and being able to focus and concentrate and apply themselves to a problem for a length of time, and be effective, is something we have to work on. That's just one example. How do we help them quiet the noise they live in, and be able to focus on the basics: reading a document, analyzing something, coming up with a report? They struggle with those basic things.

The other thing is that many of them don't appreciate the full value of work. Some of them feel like work is a chore, almost like a curse, something I need to do to make money, but I'm trying to get out of it as soon as I can. So we teach them how to find passion in it. Listen, life is too miserable to go to work and be miserable all your life. Find the passion in work well done, in appreciating the fruits of your work. And you're doing it not just for yourself, you're doing it for others as well. So what does it mean for a customer that the work is well done? And what does it mean when you're not doing a good job by them, and are maybe cheating them by not serving them well? And taking responsibility for that.

Teaching them all these things is part of the game. It's a commitment, but it's also a big reward when you see them learning about how to behave in business, and also how to find fulfillment in work.

Interviewer: What advice would you give to a young person who feels drawn to business but fears that it will suck out their soul instead of giving them life?

Nick Sanna: My advice would be to share my experience. I've been one of you. When this entrepreneur, this buddy of my dad, told me once that I was going to be either the hammer or the anvil, I rejected the idea. It's not a model I want to be a prisoner of, or a victim of. I wanted to build a different way of engaging in business.

So I would share my experience and say it can be done differently. You can build bands of brothers and sisters in professional environments, starting with you, with your outreach to them and the way you relate to them. And people typically will respond.

And don't fall victim to the situation you're in. I had bad bosses. Sometimes I've been a bad boss myself, when I didn't live out these principles. But I had bad bosses who were very top-down managers, dictatorial, demeaning to people. That should never be an excuse for the story to end there.

I was a manager under a boss who was, I think, very bad in many ways. And it was my job to be a translator down to the people, translating the mission of the company and what we needed to do as a business, but changing how it was communicated and how we related to one another. We created our own subculture, which I think was much healthier, much more constructive, much more giving. And that wasn't upsetting to a higher-level manager: as long as we got the job done, we had a lot of freedom.

Often you can have a lot of influence in your environment. So don't be a victim of the environment you're in. You can shape your own future. And then, if the environment makes it impossible for you to live differently, find a place where you can fulfill yourself, because life is really too short.

Interviewer: How can we, as a society, better educate university students?

Nick Sanna: What comes to mind is: let's not just educate the mind, but also educate the heart. How do we develop them into good, strong, capable human beings, not just in knowledge or in a trade, but also in how to relate to one another? We are social people, and we don't teach students how to socialize. If we just started with that, it would be amazing.

Interviewer: I think that's more and more true, with phones and online engagement.

Nick Sanna: It's even more important now, because the places where people learned how to act socially and engage were the family and their communities, and that support system in many places is not as strong, or is falling apart. So these kids are all alone. The only thing they know is whatever they see through a smaller or bigger screen. They don't know how to interact with one another in social settings, at work and so on. If universities want to have a big impact on students, I think that's a good place to start.

Role models

Interviewer: Who is your biggest role model?

Nick Sanna: I don't think I have only one. I've been picking from many people who inspired me.

Of course, Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare, was a big role model for me, in the sense that she made me fall in love with Jesus. Jesus was no longer a concept, an idea: she showed us how to live very fulfilling lives in ways I could not imagine. I had thought it was just a matter of rites and practices, and it didn't speak to me, it didn't mean anything.

And she was a translator. She was able to speak words that actually touched me in ways that were very personal and very concrete. She spoke words that spoke to my heart and not just to my head. And she spoke in stories and experiences, sharing her own experience and trying to put this life to work. That was life-changing for me. Because as a kid I liked the stories about Jesus, but then I looked at the people telling those stories, and their lives were not at all consistent with them.

So that's probably the biggest role model for me: not only in living it out, but also in being generous, in totally sharing her life. I've never met a person so closely in such a way. That's probably my biggest influence in life.

The happiest moment, and the best gift

Interviewer: What's the happiest you've ever been?

Nick Sanna: Wow. I don't think I've ever asked myself that.

Probably the biggest outburst of joy in my life was when my first son was born. Because I realized: oh my God, there's something enormous here: you're giving life. That blew my mind. You know it intellectually; your wife is pregnant and the kid is going to come. But when he comes out, it's like, oh my God, he's here. You're giving life, and it's a huge responsibility, but also what an exciting adventure. I have no idea how I'm going to get through it, but this is crazy. It's the craziness of life.

And then you realize there are many other moments where you can give life, not physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. I think the moments where I find the greatest fulfillment are when you find yourself in a giving mode. You end a day and you feel like you loved a lot of people, you helped a lot of people, you built strong relationships. In some cases love also comes back. In some cases it doesn't. It doesn't matter. You go back and say, this was a good day, this was a very fulfilling day, and you feel your heart full of gratitude. Those are happy moments.

And it can be simple gestures. The other day I was in New York, running to catch the metro. I play tennis, that's my outlet, it keeps me sane from business. And there was this old man coming up a very long staircase in the metro. I was about to lose my train. And I thought, this guy needs help. He has two huge suitcases, and he's going to have a heart attack here. So forget about the metro, help him out, get these suitcases up the stairs.

At the end of the day, that was a meaningful moment that made me happy. It doesn't compare with giving birth to a child, but they're moments where you're giving, where you're creating something, where something is born. Those are the happiest moments for me.

Interviewer: What's the best gift you've ever given or received?

Nick Sanna: I think the biggest gift I received is the unconditional trust of a person, a human person who decided to share her life with me. My wife. Because you choose one another fully, and in our case it wasn't just for when times are good, it was forever. Promising one another to give your full self. For me, that that's even possible, and that it's happening, blows my mind every day. Because I wouldn't deserve it. I've probably let her down many times, and I still get that love every day. It blows my mind that human beings can do that. She tells me it's been the same for her, but I'm not sure; I think she puts up with much more from me than I do from her.

So that's probably the biggest gift I've received in my life.

And in terms of giving: probably the decision to be a father and a dad. Because I could have had a comfortable life, taking care of myself and having a big career, being king of the hill, and instead not seeing that as the major accomplishment in life, but deciding to start a family with somebody, based on the gift of life and what comes with it. That's probably the biggest gift I'll keep being involved in.

People say the biggest gift is probably to give your life for somebody else. But it doesn't necessarily mean taking a bullet. It may be in small installments. For a kid, it's many sleepless nights, putting up with their crazy moments. And they also hold you to account, because they say, you say you do these things, but you don't do them. Okay, take that.

So giving life, and being faithful to those relationships to the end, is probably the biggest gift, because you cannot escape it. If you're serious about building a family, you're going to be stuck for a long time. They're going to be stuck with me, I'm stuck with them, and we'd better make it work and be a gift to one another.

Looking back

Interviewer: What are your thoughts about the Economy of Communion?

Nick Sanna: My thoughts on the EoC are that, again, it's a vehicle of hope. It changed my life, and it changed the lives of many.

From a cold analytical perspective, looking at it as an outside analyst, I would say it's grossly underdeveloped. I don't think we gave ourselves the means, from an organizational perspective, to codify the EoC so that other people can easily adopt it: how to make it more accessible.

Because sometimes we portray examples of entrepreneurs who have a lot of experience, and people think, there's no way; I'm not an entrepreneur, or I don't have 20 years of experience doing this, so there's no way I'm going to get there. So how do we make this accessible? How do we turn it into something that everybody can do? That's the truth of it, but we haven't been able to convey that. So we have a big communication and organizational problem.

Interviewer: And your thoughts on this project, the interviews?

Nick Sanna: I think it's a godsend, in the sense that it will help spread the word. And hopefully you can slice and dice things to make sure that you don't portray these entrepreneurs as superheroes, but as normal human beings. They're like everybody else, and at some point they were fortunate to meet other

people who were trying to live this lifestyle, and they fell in love with it, and had better, more joyful, more fulfilling lives because of it.

But hopefully you won't stop there, because helping codify some of the principles of the EoC in ways that are understandable in popular culture would be a great gift.