

“What people are looking for in a job is self-worth.”

Homeboy for Life



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or most people, the choice between going to work or going to prison isn't a choice at all. But my colleague Darius isn't like most people. He's an ex-felon mired in debt from his prison term.

One weekend not long after I became CEO of Homeboy Industries, Darius asked if he could take off from selling our artisanal bread at the farmers market to “report in”—as in, voluntarily spend the weekend in jail. As Darius, a stoic, diminutive man with tattoos all over his body, explained it, he had to go back to jail for three days to help pay off his debt.

Nothing I learned during the 25 years I spent as a corporate executive prepared me for that conversation, nor the thousands of others I've had with Homeboy clients in similar—or worse—positions. But conversations like these have fundamentally altered my view of leadership.

When I became CEO of Homeboy in 2012, I went into the job with all the hubris of a typical corporate leader. Not unlike most corporate CEOs, I had the view that people who worked hard proved their value and got ahead. Those who didn't prove their

worth were left behind, and rightly so. Over the last decade, however, I've seen how meritocracies can work against disenfranchised populations.

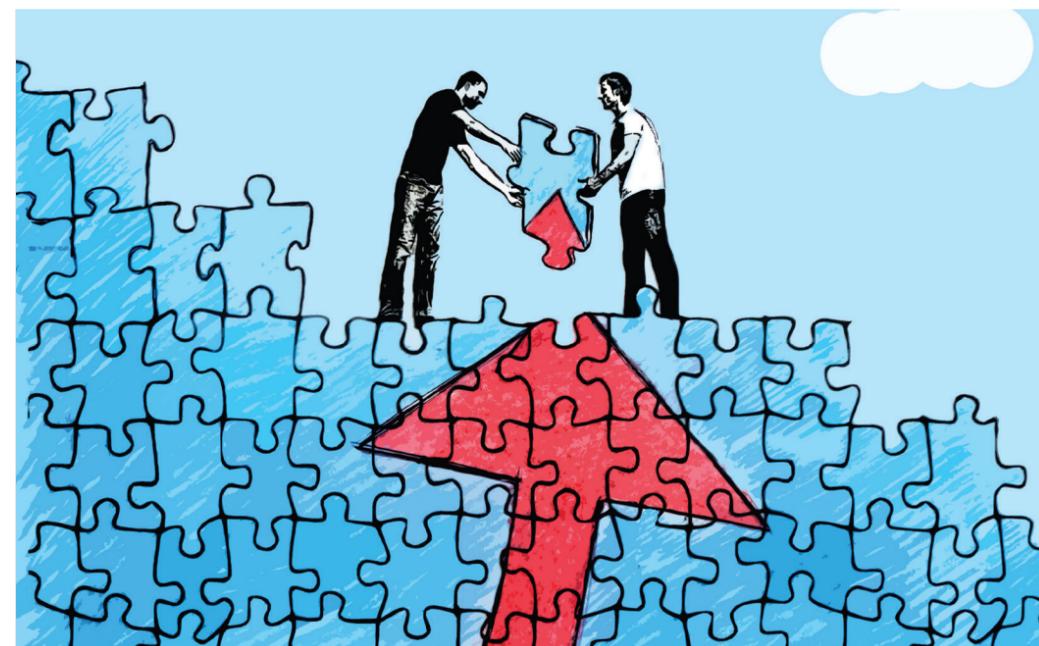
Homeboy's clients fit squarely into that demographic. Our core mission is to provide reentry services, which include job placement and training services each year to about 450 former gang members, ex-offenders, recovering drug addicts, and people from other disenfranchised populations. These are people who face cultural, economic, racial, social, and other barriers that the rest of us can't even begin to imagine. They are victims of complex trauma who lack a support system at home and often aren't even given a chance to work.

There is more than enough data to show that we as a society are disenfranchising a sizable potential part of the workforce. Business needs to do better, and one of the ways it can do so is by rethinking our meritocracy. As I write in my book *The Homeboy Way: A Radical Approach to Business and Life*, what people are looking for in a job is self-worth. Constantly being evaluated, measured, and judged undermines the value of workplace achievements.

Data and analytics don't always have the answers. Sometimes making sure people measure up means you are missing out.

At Homeboy, for instance, we bypass merit-based evaluation systems in favor of celebrating “achievements as a by-product of thriving.” The goal is to create a culture and conditions in which our clients can find their purpose and worth. But the Homeboy way doesn't just apply to the working poor and disenfranchised. In the so-called purpose

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era, leaders are increasingly being judged as much for how they treat employees as for how large their company's profits are—even more so in the aftermath of a pandemic that has disenfranchised tens of millions of workers.

As survey after survey shows, employees who believe in an organization's purpose and feel that it reflects their values have higher engagement and more motivation; they also stay longer. The Homeboy way isn't just about hiring former felons, even if the triple whammy of the pandemic, the Great Resignation, and the purpose movement has brought renewed attention to second-chance hiring. Rather,

it is about providing a support system so that each and every employee, from top performers to new hires, can find their own worth.

The best part is that leading with this approach benefits the business as well. If members of enemy gangs can work shoulder to shoulder rolling dough for bread, breaking down whatever silos exist in your organization should be easy by comparison. Make everyone feel connected by developing a culture that builds not just financial worth for the organization but also personal value for its people. Do that, and in return you'll get a corps of dedicated, diverse, long-term employees. ▀

Vozzo is CEO of Homeboy Industries, the largest and most successful gang rehabilitation and reentry program in the world. He was formerly executive vice president of the global managed-services firm Aramark.