



Meet Larry Broughton

STORIES & INSIGHTS

September 29, 2026

We recently connected with Larry Broughton and have shared our conversation below.

Larry, looking forward to hearing all of your stories today. It's always helpful to hear about times when someone's had to take a risk – how did they think through the decision, why did they take the risk, and what ended up happening. We'd love to hear about a risk you've taken.

The risk that changed the entire trajectory of my life was the decision to leave a secure, well-paying partnership and launch my own company, right into the teeth of one of the worst economic stretches in modern history. I'd spent about fourteen years with a San Francisco-based hotel

company. I'd started at the bottom, literally, as a night auditor at a rundown, pay-by-the-hour motel in the Tenderloin District, working 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. so I could attend college during the day. After working there for a few months, an investment group bought that property and converted it into one of the first boutique hotels in the country. I got pulled into the business side, eventually made partner, and helped grow that portfolio to about fourteen hotels over fourteen years. By any conventional measure, I'd made it. I was making more money than I probably deserved for a guy who hadn't even finished college.

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But here's the thing: I'm built as a primary leader, and I was stuck in a secondary leadership role. It was slowly draining the life out of me. I understood leadership, I understood the business, and I asked the right questions, but I wasn't the one ultimately calling the shots. So I made the decision to walk away from that security and start my own hotel company from scratch.



The timing could not have been worse. I launched right into the dot-com bust, a national recession, the SARS outbreak, and then the September 11th attacks on the U.S. (25 years ago). All within that same window. I remember one specific moment that captures just how close to the edge I was: I had \$84 in my bank account, payroll due, and capital calls looming from my previous company where I had ownership in several hotel assets. I had, at that point, no mentor and wasn't part of any mastermind group. I thought I was the smartest, most experienced person on my own team, which I've since learned is the fatal flaw of a lot of leaders and entrepreneurs.

That moment, staring at \$84 and a payroll obligation I couldn't meet, was the wake-up call. It forced me to swallow my pride, call former

colleagues and ask for help, hire a business mentor, and join a mastermind group of people who were bolder and brighter than I was. I've never stopped doing that since.

How did it turn out? Well, we fought through it. My team and I turned around a string of underperforming hotels and became known in the industry as turnaround artists in the boutique hotel space. That reputation opened doors to speaking invitations at industry conferences, TV appearances, and eventually a whole second career mentoring leaders and entrepreneurs, including work with Fortune 100 companies and even the Pentagon's Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Over the following two-plus decades, that company grew to be involved with around forty-five hotels.

Looking back, the risk wasn't really the leap itself...plenty of people leave secure jobs. The risk was doing it without a safety net of mentorship or community, and thinking I could out-hustle my own blind spots. The lesson I carry from it, and the one I teach now, is that the external growth of your business will always outpace your internal growth as a leader unless you deliberately invest in people who see what you can't see in yourself.

Larry, love having you share your insights with us. Before we ask you more questions, maybe you can take a moment to introduce yourself to our readers who might have missed our earlier conversations?

The throughline of my life has been leadership roles. Although I've owned several businesses, I've spent most of my career as a hotelier, leadership mentor, and keynote speaker. I'm the founder and CEO of broughtonHOTELS, and over the past twenty-plus years my team and I have owned or operated over forty boutique hotels. The speaking, mentoring, and corporate training work grew directly out of that career. As my hotel company gained a reputation, I started getting invited to speak at industry and entrepreneur conferences, and to appear

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on business shows on network and cable television, including CNBC's The Big Idea with Donny Deutsch, MSNBC's Your Business with JJ Ramberg, Travel Channel's Hotel Impossible.

Once I was in front of those audiences, leaders and entrepreneurs (everyone from early-stage founders to C-suite executives, professional athletes, and even the Pentagon's Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) started asking me for mentoring and training. It became clear there was a real appetite for no-nonsense, experience-based leadership development, not another "system for success." So I started writing articles and books, and built the speaking and mentoring business alongside the hotel company. I haven't stopped running either one since.

On the keynotes themselves, my talks center on leadership, team building, entrepreneurship, and turning chaos into opportunity. Most of it traces back to two schools I came up through: eight years on Special Forces A-Teams as a Green Beret, and thirty-plus years building and rescuing businesses. I built a framework called VICTORY, which includes seven strategies that walk leaders from Vision through Intel, Coaching, your Team, Operations, Rapid Action, and finally back to You. That framework, along with my #1 bestselling book of the same name, anchors most of what I teach.

What problem am I actually solving for clients? Two, mainly. First, the "lone wolf" problem: I see brilliant, hardworking entrepreneurs trying to do it all themselves, refusing a coach or a mastermind, convinced they're the smartest person in the room. I nearly lost everything to that exact mistake in 2001; I know it from the inside. Second, I help leaders see unmet potential where they've stopped looking: in their team members, their business, and often in themselves. Whether it's a rundown motel that needs polishing and repositioning, or a "black sheep" employee everyone else has written off, I've built a career on finding the diamond in the rough.

What sets me apart, I think, is that none of this is theoretical for me. I'm not a career consultant reciting a system. I've been in the dark and muddy trenches of life and business. I bring the discipline and quiet-professional mindset



of the Green Berets onto the stage, but I pair it with real stories of failure (divorce, an \$84 bank balance with payroll due, hardship among people close to me, the death of my 17-year-old son) because I think audiences trust earned wisdom over polished theory.

What I'm most proud of, honestly, apart from watching my kids grow into amazing humans, is my time in the Army's Green Berets. I still carry my Special Forces challenge coin every day to remind me where I came from, and a small pewter globe to remind me of the legacy and impact I still want to make on the world.

What I want people to know about my brand and my work is simple: I'm in the business of helping people recognize the greatness they can't yet see in themselves. Success isn't a solo sport (nobody is truly "self-made"), and tenacity, not raw talent, is what separates the leaders who make it from the ones who quit five feet from the gold. If I can be the voice that says "yes, you can

do this” to one more entrepreneur or leader who needs to hear it, I’ve done my job.

Do you have any insights you can share related to maintaining high team morale?



Managing a team and keeping morale high is one of the toughest, most persistent challenges any leader faces, and it never fully gets “solved.” It has to be tended to every day. But there are a few principles I come back to again and again.

First, put people in their strengths. Gallup’s State of the American Workforce survey has shown a direct correlation between how much time an employee spends working in their strengths and their morale, positivity, and job satisfaction. Stress, burnout, and turnover are usually symptoms of team members working outside their strengths, not signs of lazy or bad employees. I actually have people I coach do a simple exercise: divide a page into three columns: “Doing,” “Great At,” and “Love It.” Whatever shows up in both the “Great At” and “Love It” columns is where that person should be spending the bulk of their time. Everything else should be deleted, delegated, or deferred. Imagine what happens to a team’s energy when every person walks in each morning knowing

they’ll spend most of their day doing what they’re actually built to do. Positivity goes up, productivity goes up, and profit follows both.

Second, catch people doing things right. Too many managers withhold praise and lean on the carrot-and-stick approach, thinking that’s what discipline looks like. It’s backwards. Real-time, specific recognition: even something as simple as a handwritten note acknowledging someone’s effort does more for morale than any incentive program ever built. And that recognition has to include the failures, not just the wins. Some of the most valuable moments I’ve had with team members came after something didn’t work. That’s where the real lessons live, and if you frame failure as data instead of a verdict on someone’s worth, people stop hiding their mistakes and start bringing you the truth faster.

Third, care enough to confront. Morale isn’t just built through praise; it’s protected through honest, timely correction. I learned this mantra early in my leadership career: “care enough to confront.” Too often we’re either overly blunt and wound people, or so conflict-avoidant that resentment quietly builds and performance issues never get addressed. Correcting quickly, privately, and with the intent to teach rather than punish keeps small issues from calcifying into culture problems.



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Fourth, invest in their growth. Gallup also points out that one of the top reasons people leave a job is that they don't feel like they're being developed. Spotlight coaching throughout the week, and formal skills training when you can offer it, tells your team you're invested in them, not just their output.

And underneath all of it, I ask myself where my organization sits on what I call the Productivity-Positivity Matrix. High productivity with low positivity means you're grinding people down and burning through human capital; you need recognition and better conditions before it costs you your best people. High positivity with low productivity means you've built a nice culture with no teeth; you need clear goals and accountability. The teams destined for greatness are high in both...and they get there by celebrating success often, while still having the humility to learn from every failure along the way.

At the end of the day, I believe most people want to do meaningful work, be seen for their effort, and grow. Our job as a leader is simply to build the conditions where that's possible, and then get out of their way.

Learning and unlearning are both critical parts of growth – can you share a story of a time when you had to unlearn a lesson?

The lesson I had to unlearn was that vulnerability equals weakness.

For much of my life, I operated like an automaton, a robot, honestly. I carried this false belief that if I let myself be vulnerable, showed emotion, or admitted I didn't have it all figured out, people would see that as weakness, and I couldn't have that. Not as a Green Beret, not as a CEO. So I kept everything locked down and monotone.

The backstory is pretty simple: my best efforts, operating that way, eventually stopped working. I hit a point in my life where I had to

admit that the armor I'd built wasn't protecting me; it was isolating me. I'm one of those people who tends to learn by hitting bottom rather than by someone gently pointing me in the right direction, and that's exactly what



happened. I ended up in therapy, working with mentors and a spiritual advisor, and going to seminars alongside people further down the path than I was. A therapist finally asked me a simple question: why don't I have the difficult conversations I've been avoiding with my spouse, with business partners, and with the people in my life? So I started allowing myself to actually feel things and to say them out loud.

What I discovered is that courage isn't the absence of vulnerability; courage IS vulnerability. It's like a muscle: the more I used it, the stronger it got, and the more benefit I saw. And here's the part that surprised me most: when I was willing to be a little vulnerable with someone (a team member, a mentee, or a podcast host), it gave them permission to do the same. Suddenly we weren't CEO-and-employee or host-and-guest anymore. We were just two humans, doing life together.

That lesson runs alongside a closely related one I had to unlearn in business: the Lone Wolf myth. I used to believe real entrepreneurs figure it out



on their own, that asking for help was itself a form of weakness. I can trace the vast majority of my biggest failures directly back to trying to go it alone, and nearly every one of my biggest successes back to a moment when I finally let a coach, mentor, or mastermind group into the room. Both lessons come from the same root misunderstanding: that strength means never needing anyone. It doesn't. Strength is having the courage to be seen (flaws, fears, and all) and to let other people in.

Contact Info:

Website: larrybroughton.com

Instagram: [instagram.com/larrybroughton](https://www.instagram.com/larrybroughton)

Facebook: [facebook.com/larrybroughton](https://www.facebook.com/larrybroughton)

Linkedin: [instagram.com/larrybroughton](https://www.linkedin.com/company/larrybroughton)

Youtube: [youtube.com/thelarrybroughton](https://www.youtube.com/thelarrybroughton)