People + Strategy guest editors David Reimer and Scott Kelly and associate Mary Boland sat down with Stella & Dot founder and CEO Jessica Herrin to discuss how the company leverages technology to build a culture that seeks to delight employees, its more than 50,000 entrepreneurial women, and the company’s global customer base.

Stella & Dot Offers Flexibility and Flair

**P+S:** To set context, what was your original vision for Stella & Dot and how has that vision evolved with time and experience?

**Jessica:** From the beginning, Stella & Dot was not only about creating a company, but also a life. That meant that I would need to be passionately aligned and soulfully connected to what I was pursuing rather than just trying to create a company for commercial success. My passion and energy were in creating better work for women. My original inspiration came through an experience in my first company, WeddingChannel.com, where I met a group of women who were working for an old-school, direct-selling company. I recognized how profound it was that these outdated models were defining flexible work for women, and knew that I wanted to redefine flexible entrepreneurial work for us.

**P+S:** From that original idea, did you dive straight into the current business model, or has it changed as you have learned along the way?

**Jessica:** I definitely dove into the business model, but I had to dive in as a student. My background was in enterprise software and ecommerce, not in goods manufacturing, and certainly not in direct sales. I spent years studying the model, going to the trade association conferences, and walking a mile in the shoes of the independent seller to learn what the real business opportunity was.

**P+S:** How have you developed and sustained culture within the central function of your company?

**Jessica:** We have a very mission-driven, entrepreneurial culture that originated at our founding. We bootstrapped the company from the beginning, were very scrappy, and were always trying to find new, creative ways to get something done. I think our culture reflects both our origin and our values. I have always sought to hire missionaries, not mercenaries. I look for artisans in the business who are looking to create, not just flip something. The number one thing that you can do for culture is hire well. Once we hire, we make sure the origin and mission of the company is known to all. We want our hires to use their individual genius to think creatively, and we also want them to carry our core values and history with them as they do. Culture can be a great intention, but it cannot be described in PowerPoint; it has to be deliberately worked on every single day by dedicated individuals.

**P+S:** How does your organizational structure support the business and the culture? What are the challenges?

**Jessica:** If you look at where we began, we used to be a single-category product, in a single brand, in a single country. Today, we are multi-brand, multi-category, and multi-national. Since our founding, the Stella & Dot family of brands has paid out well over $400 million in flexible income to over 50,000 business owners in three brands and six countries. Clearly, the level of complexity has grown within our organizational structure. We constantly assess the organization to make sure that decisions can be made quickly, and by the right people at the right lev-
el of the organization. It is difficult for a company to remain entrepreneurial if it is over-processed.

**P+S:** How do Stella & Dot’s independent business owners impact the culture of the company? Are they separate?

**Jessica:** They are absolutely part of our culture. These individuals are entrepreneurs who set their own hours and pace, and don’t have any quotas or territories. The thing I am proudest of is that Stella & Dot is not just about selling a great product. It’s also a community that lifts people up with a strong aura of positivity and support. I believe that our business owners not only get incremental income, but that they get skill set development and gain personal growth within our organization. We actively lead by example at a central command level, but also provide a tremendous amount of coaching and leadership development within our field. Everything that we do at central command, we do to ensure we have delivered value and utility to our customers and business owners. One of the ways we do this is by being a mobile, social-driven technology company.

**P+S:** Technology is a huge part of your company. How do you leverage technology given that you have a distributed workforce, a rather lean central function, and are selling to a distributed marketplace?

**Jessica:** Stella & Dot is a technology company. While people always come first, we are a technology company that has developed a proprietary social selling platform. Stella & Dot is a full-fledged innovator across our mobile apps and e-commerce system because we have a unique way of selling. We built that platform, and it is very critical to our strategy. We are always creating unique solutions for our users. In addition, we utilize existing technology platforms, such as Facebook and Zoom. Through these mediums and others, we are able to remain closely connected to our field and maintain a relationship. It is integral to our business model that we have that level of intimacy and connection.

**P+S:** Elaborate more on the way technology helps Stella & Dot’s business model retain close relationships with such a distributed workforce.

**Jessica:** Our business owners choose to work with us because they want to work when they want and earn what they need. Oftentimes, our business owners also have full-time jobs and busy family lives. Sometimes, they are working with us for the challenge and passion, but most of the time it is because they are working for incremental money for an incremental need. Our business owners are working on their phones, on their lunch breaks, or while they are multitasking. As a technologist, I love that about our challenge because it is not enough to make working for Stella & Dot simple. It really needs to be delightful, because you are getting these individuals on their own time, when they are often tired from the demands of their already-busy life.

**P+S:** Does Stella & Dot use artificial intelligence, machine learning, or data analytics? If so, what role do they play in the business model?

**Jessica:** We do a lot with data analytics. We have a powerful model in which we collect data from all of our customer transactions throughout the world, which we then are able to use to notify and prompt our individual business owners around what products would be the best fit for their customers. We also use it to help solve some of their most common questions later.

**P+S:** When you think about the business model you created, the culture that you have and want to protect, and your book’s message of helping others find their extraordinary, how do all three strands tie together?

**Jessica:** The beautiful thing about being in a mission-driven business is that while there will be good days and bad days, the mission makes climbing the hill worthwhile. In writing my book, *Find Your Extraordinary*, I was attempting to express my belief that an ordinary person can create an extraordinary life for themselves. I think there are core traits of entrepreneurship that you can use to create more than a business, but a life. I have six Ps of the entrepreneurial spirit that I believe help an individual create the life and business they want. By far, the most important P is people. People are everything. My success is not a byproduct of what I have been able to do, but rather it is a result of helping others become successful along the way. I think this is true if you are founding a business, just graduating from college, or advancing inside of a large company.

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**P+S:** What sort of advice would you give to legacy organizations that need to transition from their legacy playbook to a more digitally nimble approach?

**Jessica:** While I believe that legacy is important, what is more important is constant change and evolution. You either change or you die. Change isn’t innovation, but life in business. I would say to a legacy organization, focus on where you are going and what you are becoming, not on what you have been.

**P+S:** In an organization like Stella & Dot, what is it that you as CEO and founder need from HR?

**Jessica:** Your people partner is a critical partner for the CEO, as is the CFO. This trio of people is going to create and shape the organization. At Stella & Dot, our general managers and my creative partner play a big role in that as well. Ultimately, you need great leadership development. These development initiatives should not be owned by one person, but by a group of people strategists who are constantly helping all our leaders cultivate the growth in people that enables our culture. This is an incredibly critical role. The quest is to get the right team, get better every day, and never settle with where you are on the journey.