

Karen James

# on PURPOSE



Why great leaders  
start with the  
PLOT

WILEY



Okay, I will admit Karen James went to school with my kids, Lisa, Danielle and Shannon. Well, so what! That doesn't mean I don't know what an excellent book is. *On Purpose* is important because we all need to find the path to what matters in life. Reading is learning and learning is the path. We all need to get on one. Karen did...

**— Bob Gaudio, songwriter, producer, founding member of  
The Four Seasons, inspiration for the Jersey Boys**

*On Purpose* provides a simple formula to transcend your organisation's purpose into action and literally get everyone on-purpose. Karen's methods and leadership are exemplary, as experienced over the six years we have worked together. She is infectious and brings real purpose to any endeavour, including now her book.

**— Symon Brewis-Weston, CEO Sovereign Insurance  
(wholly owned by Commonwealth Bank),  
one of five business leaders to be awarded the  
Winner United Nations 2015 Women's Empowerment  
Principles Chief Executive leadership award**

Karen is one of the most purpose-driven people I have ever met. She operates with a strong sense of ethics and humanity. The philosophy and the framework behind *On Purpose* is great advice for anyone who wants to transform themselves and their organisation.

**— Janet Holmes à Court AC**

Today's world needs this book—delivered with wit, humour and cut through New York style, Karen's decade of experience in life and business is bottled up in a fable, a manifesto and a practical framework that will get you and your organisation on-purpose. The complex made simple. I love it and look forward to joining Karen to create a movement to mobilise on-purpose leaders.

**—Ronni Kahn, CEO and Founder of OzHarvest, the first perishable food rescue organisation in Australia, now in its 10th year. Winner of Veuve Clicquot Initiative for Economic Development 2012, Ernst & Young Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2012, and Australian Local Hero of the Year 2010.**

*On Purpose* is a book which simplifies Karen's deep understanding of how to make things happen in the business world into a framework for every person and organisation. Karen's ability to take an idea and turn it into reality is first class—and I know that firsthand from my participation in the Commonwealth Bank's Women in Focus program. For more than a quarter of a century through a journey of ups and downs that the faint-hearted would have given in, Karen's track record is *On Purpose*'s testimony. Getting to the how is as important as the why—*On Purpose* brings the two together in a formula that I look forward to promoting.

**—Naomi Simson, Founding Director RedBalloon**

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*To my daughters, Ashley and Madison  
In memory of my mother—Kath, Mom, Gran*

Live  
Life  
ON  
Purpose.



Karen James



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# FOREWORD

I loved this book and read it in one sitting, give or take a few tea and coffee breaks. Karen James has written about business in a fresh and beguiling way and it is understood from the beginning that she loves both business and education as I do. She just wants them to be better and her manifesto offers advice about how we might change.

These are not changes that require regulation by government but changes in how we play the game and take personal responsibility for change. She reminds us that values statements hanging on the company walls or coming up on the screen matter not a toss if people do not live them.

*On Purpose* is a cleverly constructed book, as we might expect from its engineer author. Each section can stand alone or be connected—a sublime literary and engineering feat.

The Fable evoked powerful memories for me as I reflected on my first classroom experience. Planning a career as a secondary school teacher I was surprised to be assigned to a primary school for my first practice teaching my postgraduate year. My supervisor considered that exposure and early practice with 8–12 year olds offered the best experience for a teaching career. He was right.

More than five decades later I work in different classrooms and boardrooms but how I loved being thrown back into Ms Molloy's

classroom in Glen Fark County with a group of 8-year-olds whose first project of the year is to build a bank.

They go back to basics as they ask: What does a bank do? What is its purpose? Does it have values? Would we want to work there?

Ms Molloy suggests the children include their parents in the project and the outcomes are surprising but you need to read that for yourself.

*On Purpose* is a contemporary cautionary ethical tale, a fable we can all understand. It reminds us we should never underestimate the capacity of 8-year-olds to manage complexity with purpose, ethics and humanity, all the big words they were asked to consider as they followed the PLOT methodology. It was sad to leave Ms Molloy's classroom. It was an exciting learning place.

In the Manifesto our author writes of her central thesis that there must be a meaningful purpose at the core of our lives and our organisations. We need to keep our heads and hearts connected in order to live purpose-filled lives.

It is hard to disagree but for many of us we need to know how to achieve that.

The PLOT framework—Purpose, Leadership, Operations and Technology—is offered as a methodology to facilitate discussion, raise questions, challenge, gauge and monitor attainment of an on-purpose organisation.

This book could become the new black for business.

How could you not aspire to be on-purpose personally or professionally?

**Wendy McCarthy AO**

**Educator, Mentor, Non-executive Director**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fast-talking, funny and pulling no punches, Karen James is a Jersey girl turned social entrepreneur who has risen through the ranks of the global corporate world while honouring her most important role in life as a proud single mother and humanitarian. From building with her team a 10 000-strong community of women within a leading bank, to integrating not-for-profit leadership lessons into corporate boardrooms and growing a company from a turnover of \$9 million to a turnover of \$100 million, Karen is a fixer and a doer who matches head with heart—and makes it everyone's business to do the same.

In her debut book, Karen applies the same pragmatic logic to timeless questions around creating purpose and building an organisation with humanity at its heart.

Her company, BEact Pty Ltd, helps others to embed this same logic into their own lives and organisations to create a truly sustainable world that we can all benefit from.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my readers, thank you for taking the time and energy to read *On Purpose*. Without you the book has no purpose.

To my family and family (friends who are family)—without you I would not be who I am today and I would not know how on earth anything would be possible. You are everything to me.

To my team who has been pivotal in this book, who believed in me and the idea, and who I look forward to working with as our journey continues.

To the community of women who have united to help each other—you believed in me, you let me dance like Ellen, and you lit the flame for this book.

To the people I have worked with, and for, over many years and countries—thank you for trusting and believing in me and my ideas.

To my creative Argentinian illustrators for bringing the characters of the fable to life.

To Wiley for giving me the opportunity to publish this book and bring it to life.

To the gift from above. I know my hand is not on my steering wheel and I am humbled to be given the life I have. Thank you for putting PLOT in my heart and for directing me to turn right (you will understand this after you read *On Purpose*).





# INTRODUCTION

A business book with a fable; why read it?

‘Interesting’, you may think (or not!)—‘what’s that all about?’. Let me introduce you to *On Purpose*, a book of three parts: The Fable (Back to School); the Manifesto; and PLOT, the business book.

Sometimes going back and seeing things the way we did when we were children helps us to clarify what’s really important and why. The fable takes you on the journey of a teacher setting her Grade 3 students the assignment of building a bank. Along the way a diverse group of eight-year-olds learn important lessons about ethics and humanity and how these values need to be woven into the organisations of our future.

The second part of the book is the bridge between the fictitious and the future. Aptly titled, the Manifesto is a declaration of intentions. It unpacks the intentions of *On Purpose* and its fable in preparation for practical application in your business, and potentially your life—bringing intentions to the front of the classroom.

The third part of the book is the practical application—showing how great businesses PLOT their success by linking **P**urpose, **L**eadership, **O**perations and **T**echnology. At the end of this book you will understand the importance of making purpose the driver of your organisation, and be able to practically monitor your progress through the purpose-led PLOT Framework.

*On Purpose* is a book to act on.

# The Fable (Back to School)

Many years ago I realised that I was a storyteller—at home, at work, at play. At work it seemed that there were many stories: it was the story of the customer, the story of the employee, the story of the vision, the story of success that always hit the mark much faster than the documents, PowerPoint presentations and reports. These stories connected us all through our humanity. So it seemed natural to begin with a fable to interpret the context of the book through the eyes of a child, and through the subtle lessons of life that are so readily seen when we are young.

My life has been shaped by my ‘teachers’: my school teachers; my mother; my grandmother Bebe; my great-aunts; my cousins; and my ‘family’ (friends who have become family). We need teachers. Without teachers we believe the rhetoric, and when we believe the rhetoric we start behaving as though it is the truth.

There is something very humbling about being a student, being open to learning and being open to change—and opportunity often lies in the shadow of change. The fable introduces the purpose-led PLOT Framework through innocence, creativity, opportunity, a dash of humour and connection. I hope you connect with one or more of the characters. It is connection with the characters of our world that binds us and creates the magic.

I don’t want to spoil the fable so I shall leave you to read on. Look for the subtle leadership lessons—they are fast and furious.

## Manifesto

Engineers are taught early on the importance of the simple truss when building bridges—that beautiful structural frame based on the geometric strength of the triangle. This book’s bridge, the Manifesto, binds (or trusses) the fable to the world of business by outlining the importance of intentions. It is a passage out of the fable and into the business book, simplifying and strengthening

the message of the importance of being and acting on-purpose in today's changing world.

## PLOT

The third part of the book, PLOT, provides a framework for organisational and business application of **P**urpose, **L**eadership, **O**perations and **T**echnology and, most importantly, explains how to instil and ingrain these into our lives—at home and at work. Our purpose (the thing that really matters) and meaning (the reason it matters to us) are foundational, but without action it is just a story. We need to know *how* to do this. Practically. *On purpose*. I don't mean the idiom that gets thrown at you when you are a child. I'm talking about compelling purposes you live and work by, and the ability to turn those intentions into actions.

The Action chapter introduces three tools to bring it all to life. The PLOT Framework acts as a gauge to track how your purpose and leadership are integrated into your operations and technology. The customisable mobile app brings the message alive by sharing purpose, leadership, what you are doing and how you are doing things—creating a storyboard that celebrates your success, chronicles your journey and connects everyone along the way. The presentation templates (PowerPoint and Prezi) are included in the event that you are a bit like me and enjoy the story but not the documentation.

\* \* \*

Linking and threading purpose seamlessly through leadership, operations and technology is hard work and is a relentless pursuit. Pull one thread out and you start to unravel the possibility of greatness and success. This is the key point of the book and the PLOT Framework—all four matter in our unpredictable, digitised future.

My hope for you is that you enjoy and are transformed by this book, one page at a time.



# PART I

—— The Fable ——  
(Back to  
School)



W e've all been eight years old, innocent and wide-eyed.  
We've all been students willing and wanting to learn.  
And we've all had a teacher we loved.

This modern-day fable seeks to help us find—and stay true to—our purpose when we're charting off course.

Our fable is set in Glen Fark County, post GFC, in a world where reality TV takes precedence and the size of celebrities' derrières is at the front of too many people's minds.

Our all-seeing narrator takes us into Ms Molloy's classroom, where a class of students will soon begin work on one of their most challenging assignments yet: learning leadership lessons of a complex business world and staying true to these, no matter the circumstance.

It's an adult world—you'd think, at least—so the children seek a little help from one of the parents, Bob. Bob is a hard-working banker (and, as you will soon see, many of us have worked for, or with, a 'Bob').

I hope you enjoy the fable in all its irony, which may weave some morals and lessons through a little piece of your world. Some are stated, some are subtle and some are specific only for a few of us—unique for 'our' stories. A free-form Smartboard has been created in the back of the book for the note-takers like me (give me digital, but please let me keep my Moleskine notebook). With or without notes, it, as we say in New Jersey, may help you to get shit done.

Oh, just one more thing: every good fable features an animal and this one is no different. There's an elephant in the room. See if you can find it...

# Meet the characters



Ms Molloy



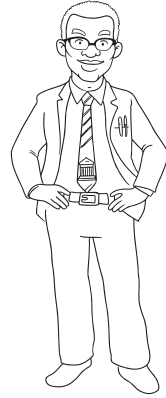
Mrs Laforte



Mrs Doogan



Vikki



Steve



Bob



Bobby



Nicholas



Abby



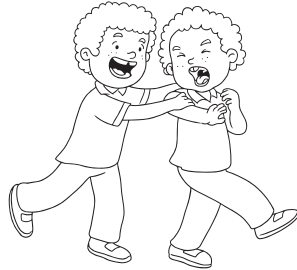
Sally



Julia



Betsy



David & Johnny Hehman



## The adults

**Ms Molloy** teaches Glen Fark County Elementary School's Grade 3 class, which is filled with wide-eyed eight-year-olds. She is a firm but fair teacher with a huge heart. Our narrator will introduce you to her shortly.

**Mrs Laforte** is the assistant principal, a career teacher committed to the betterment of children and society. She has a heart of gold and coaches the teachers regularly to be bold and creative.

**Mrs Doogan** is the wire-haired, affable principal, who knows she has to follow the rules although she would rather get back to basics and hug the children like she used to in the 1970s.

**Vikki** is Betsy's mum and works in the IT industry. She loves getting involved in the school and is committed to making sure her daughter Betsy has everything that a two-parent-family child has.

**Steve** works for Synergy Bank and looks after the school banking program. He knows the importance of good customer service but is often torn between customers and process.

**Bob** is a banker who works in New York City. He grew up in a working-class blue-collar town in New Jersey, and grafted his way to Wall Street. Bob is a family man, a businessman, and—well, you will learn more about him as you read on.

## The students

**Bobby** is the son of Bob the banker. Bobby is not sure of himself and is sometimes nervous. He knows he wants to be more than the influences around him.

**Nicholas** is earnest and eager. He is very smart and has a sharp sense of bringing the team with him. Nicholas builds bridges between people even at the young age of eight.

**Abby** is quiet but profound. Most of the class knows she has the answers; they just need to give her the chance to be heard. Sally and Abby are good friends.