



Nancy Duarte ([00:02](#)):

I feel like that's what I do, what my body of work does. It gives people a voice. It gives people the ability to make a difference and to make change.

Speaker 2 ([00:17](#)):

You're listening to the Faith and Work Podcast, where we explore what it means to serve God, neighbor, and society through our daily work.

Dustin Moody ([00:27](#)):

Hello, and thanks for listening to the faith and work podcast. I'm Dustin Moody, director of communications at Denver Institute for Faith and Work, and our guest today is Nancy Duarte. Some of you may know Nancy from her work as a speaker and an author, perhaps you're one of the two and a half million people who have watched her Ted talk, but you may not know that Nancy and her husband are Christians who lead a communications agency in the San Francisco Bay area. My colleague Joanna Meyer talked with Nancy a few weeks ago as part of our annual event called Women, Work and Calling. And while some of their discussion focuses on the unique challenges for women in business and women in leadership, Nancy's expertise in communications and leadership, and the ways that she and her husband have integrated their faith and their work, are valuable for anyone. Personally, I've been a fan of Nancy's work for several years. So it's an honor to share this episode with you

Joanna Meyer ([01:20](#)):

For our closing session, I'm excited for you to hear from an executive leader I admire greatly, Nancy Duarte. 30 years ago, Nancy founded Duarte with her husband Mark, and it has grown to become one of the top corporate communications and messaging agencies in the world. In fact, she's recognized in Silicon Valley is one of the top female business owners. Nancy's amazing. I don't know if you realize this, but her Ted talk, the secret structure of great talks, has been viewed 2.6 million times. She is nationally and internationally known for her expertise in storytelling and messaging.

But what people don't realize is that Nancy is a woman of deep faith and from the origins of her company, she and Mark have sought to instill values and intentionality in the way that they run their business. So in this intriguing conversation with Nancy, we'll hear both about her personal journey, as well as her philosophy of leadership and what it's like being a woman who leads in Silicon Valley. So I'm excited for you to hear from Nancy, joining us today from Silicon Valley.

Nancy, thanks for making time for us in your day. What a gift to be able to talk to you. I would love to know a little bit more about the history of Duarte. Specifically, how you and your husband Mark made this big pivot from working in full-time ministry at a church, to thinking that owning your own company could be a form of ministry. Tell us a little bit more about how you develop that perspective.

Nancy Duarte ([02:43](#)):

Yeah, so we actually moved into the Silicon Valley for Mark to go to Bible college and he'd been going for about 18 months, and he realized, in some ways, it was undoing his faith and he had a big commute, about a 40 commute over the Santa Cruz mountains, and he was praying and he said, what would bring God the most favor is whatever takes the most faith. And so he really felt like it would take him more faith to start a business than it would to stay in the ministry, because we'd already been in the ministry. That was kind of the genesis for the whole thing.



Got a little Mac plus, and he started doing technical illustrations and we always felt like we came here to shepherd a group of people. We always felt like we wanted to care and feed a group of people and we come out of the church and it wasn't a great experience. And we thought we wanted something different than, or even better than, that in community. And so it was kind of natural to take what we thought we were going to do and apply it to this beautiful, diverse, awesome motley crew of amazing creatives. And we're very happy with our little sheep that we get to shepherd. So it's been fun.

Joanna Meyer ([03:56](#)):

30 years later, your flock has grown, which is amazing to see. So how does your faith shape the day-to-day culture and operations at the company?

Nancy Duarte ([04:04](#)):

It's a great question. So the culture is driven by a set of values and our values were formed through different seasons of pressure. You can state a value, but it gets tested to see if it's true, especially during hardships. And my first set of values I ever wrote or codified was during the dot com downturn. And about four years ago, we were going to another season of pressure when we put this crazy MIS system in and it was just painful, and I found the old values and then re-nuanced them. And every single value, there is four values and four operational, and it makes this beautiful diagram. It looks like a flower actually. Every single value and everything we commit to is based in a scripture. So we'll tell a story around the values and they're all based in scriptural. And our values spell the word bliss. Belong, lead, innovate, and serve.

But then Mark and I also have what we just shared with the company during COVID is our own value system towards finances. And all of that is also based in scripture. It's owe no man nothing. So we don't go in debt. It's render to Caesar what is Caesars. We pay our taxes and we even tip Uncle Sam a little extra, just so he never bugs us. We sleep like babies. The way we do our finances is very important, too, because whatever your value systems towards money is, determines how at risk your company is. And so we really felt like we needed to share that, because we planned for COVID since... We planned for a downturn since 2008, and we really felt it was important that people understood our financial belief systems, so I did a whole slide. It had four facets to it and it was all scripture. And we explained to them why we have this value system. And the whole company was really relieved, to be honest with you, about our beliefs toward money, because they knew that it was securing their future too.

Joanna Meyer ([06:03](#)):

That's amazing. When has it been most difficult to live by your Christian convictions in the workplace?

Nancy Duarte ([06:10](#)):

Oh, that's a good question. I think that we've been persecuted for our faith years ago. There was like an atheist club and my president at the time came to me. It was like 15 years ago, maybe it's even been longer. He's like, I should shut this down and he's not a Christian and you don't have to be a Christian to work for me at all. We're an equal opportunity employer. And so he thought I would be offended by this atheist club and I'm, no, well, if I shut them down they would shut me down and they get to believe and do what they want. And if our love doesn't supersede even my profession of my faith, then there's something wrong. If people attack me for my character, that's really bad. If they attack me for my faith, I signed up for that.

I signed up to be persecuted when I decided to follow the Lord. It's what we sign up to do. So actually, believe it or not, my hardest time has actually been not from people who don't believe like me, but actually from people who do, which is fascinating to me where they'll they'll contest my faith or... It's just interesting. So I can't say that it has been hard by being a Christian. What's been hard is when I'm flawed and fail in some way, because we're flawed, as a business person, I am going to make the wrong decisions. Hopefully a tiny percent of them are the wrong ones or I'm going to say something the wrong way. I'm going to offend somebody. I'm going to hurt someone's feelings. Then you have to work really hard at being able to recognize when you've done that and have an open and honest conversation about it.

I think my whole firm is a very strong storytelling firm, not like fictions and fairytales, but literally sometimes we'll be in an exec meeting and we're so caught up in storytelling and talking about life and how hard it is and then how we overcame it that some people that have observed my exec meeting sometimes think they're not that productive, but I wouldn't have it any other way because that's what life is, right? Where this likable person who works real hard and tries real hard and we mess up and there're roadblocks and just like a story, right? The boy gets the girl, loses the girl, has to fight a dinosaur or a dragon, or... It's just endless the kind of roadblocks that we go through in business. And then ultimately we're changed by the experience.

So I would say that we try to be an organization that extends a lot of grace and that broken people work here and we're different in our brokenness and that's okay. Because it's not about uniformity, it's about unity. And so that's what we work hard on is being united and different. And that's one of our values actually, which you asked kind of earlier, is value each other's differences. So if I didn't value that someone believed differently than I do, I'm not valuing that we're different. And then they therefore will value me because I'm different in my faith and in my way of working and believing. [crosstalk 00:00:09:14]. Did that answer your question?

Joanna Meyer ([09:15](#)):

Totally. Tell me more about the power of story within your workplace, because I know that inviting your employees to share their story has been one of the most powerful unifying tools. Can you tell us a little bit more about how you use that? And I know it goes beyond Duarte. You've shared these principles with other companies, too.

Nancy Duarte ([09:31](#)):

Story is such a powerful communication device. So I've said that our values are belong, lead, innovate, and serve. And so belonging is created a lot of times through the stories we tell. So we have different ways and different formats that we tell stories. We host story nights. But the big thing that we do on a somewhat annual basis is we have what's called a speak up, and we have eight employees tell an eight minute story and you get to work with my best writers, my best graphic designers. You get this story and you go on the stage and the audience is laughing, you're crying, it's all the feels. It's up down, up down, and the brain science does show that when a story is being told, I not only connect to the storyteller, and I always knew that, what I wasn't expecting was the bond that happens to everyone in the audience who experienced that story together.

And it creates a communal effervescence, unlike anything I've ever seen. So we got asked to the chairman of the board of NBC universal, all the great TV shows asked us to come down and tell all of his executive staff how to communicate through story, which is crazy because these are the writers of the greatest shows on the planet. And he wanted to see what it was like if the communal effervescence was true and sure enough, they all started to tell the stories and we taught them how to shape it, and then

they told the stories and it was just like soda pop in the room. It was just so unbelievable, and he just was grinning. This is exactly what I wanted. I want them to get to know each other, bond with each other, understand the power of the story with their work peers. Now we're great at cocktails and family parties, but at work, how good are we at using story to situationally coach people to make people stronger, to give people hope. It's just such a powerful communication device.

Joanna Meyer ([11:26](#)):

One of the things that has stood out to me as I've interacted with you and heard you talk about the employees that you lead is that you are fierce. You're like a mother hen for the employees that you lead. So you're driving through the parking lot, and you're not just thinking about the next project. You're thinking about how can we create meaningful work for our employees so that they can send their kids to college, or that they can be able to have a home for their family that's a comfortable place to live. And I saw a quote from you, I want to share it because it just impressed. You said "I try to make a way for people to flourish and a way for people to develop into something they never thought they could believe or become because that's what happened to me. I feel like if I could do this, anybody could do this." And I want to know a little bit more about how this commitment to creating a place for your employees to flourish shapes your leadership day to day.

Nancy Duarte ([12:13](#)):

That's a great question. I definitely care. I care about everyone and there's been a real grief in me around being in the Silicon Valley and just the price of living here, and will I ever be able to afford anyone a home and all of that wealth and riches that it takes to be here, and I've spent more than a dozen nights up crying about that. That's a big thing to me, especially as a Christian leader. Should I have more abundance than others and be more generous than most? That was what I wanted to have happen, but I'm a self-funded service business, and so some of the things that we do to make it have enough meaning, where people will choose to drive into my parking lot, instead of someone else's, is we help people get to know themselves part of it.

So every employee, we go through all these psychometrics and they learn to know thyself. So if you think about it like a concentric circle, what Jesus said, "Love others as you love yourself." So we teach them about themselves through some of these tools, teach them to accept and love themselves, and then teach them to love each other through kind of these team building skills. That's why I was saying we're not looking for uniformity. We're looking for unity. I think it goes, love thyself, love each other, and then you are united. And so as a leadership team, we try to be generous. We try to meet their human felt need. Anything we can do, like we just gave everyone 50 bucks. Just go buy yourself some organic groceries or Instacart, whatever we could do to constantly know what they're feeling and try to meet them there.

Just kind of do that a lot. We know everyone's love languages and we try to make them feel that bond, make them feel like they belong through how they feel valued. And we just have gobs of tools. I think that's part of the promise of working here. So many people go through McKinsey and become CEOs. What if we just had a lot of people come through Duarte, what would they become? And we thought, they would have a foundation of incredible communication skills and incredible gift back to the world. We don't want people to pass through here. We want them to stick here forever, but it's always beautiful to have alumni, even, that are just scaling some of the biggest walls and popping through the greatest ceilings. And it's just been really fun to see that.

Joanna Meyer ([14:39](#)):



I would love to meet some of them.

Jeff Haanen ([14:44](#)):

Hi, I'm Jeff Haanen, the founder and executive director of Denver Institute for Faith and Work. Thanks for listening to the Faith and Work Podcast. Each day thousands of people listen to our podcast, engage our short courses, and grow spiritually as a result of generous donors like you. Whether you're listening from Colorado or anywhere in the country, would you consider becoming a financial contributor to Denver Institute? Colorado Gives Day IS coming up on Tuesday, December 8th. Through this one day statewide event, we hope to raise \$25,000 to finish the year financially strong.

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Joanna Meyer ([16:00](#)):

Can I ask you a question about the picture of Horton over your shoulder? So over your right shoulder, we can see Horton, and I know that he serves as a metaphor for you in ways in your leadership. Tell me about that.

Nancy Duarte ([16:09](#)):

Yeah, I love this. I have photocopies of pages of the book where I can draw on. I loved the concept that Horton could hear the voiceless. He could hear the ones that had no voice. And I feel like that's what I do, what my body of work does. It gives people a voice. It gives people the ability to make a difference and to make change, and if you think about the power of the spoken word, I mean, I believe we went from invisible to the world formed just through the power of the spoken word. You can't really point to a movement that didn't start with an impassioned plea of sorts.

So to be experts in the spoken word, business and giving kind of the voice to the voiceless and the causes and the concern, some of life's and the world's biggest concerns is just humbling. And in so many ways, Horton's kind of a metaphor for that for me and for the firm. More for me probably, but yeah, I just love him. That's an actual print. It's a numbered print from Dr. Seuss.

Joanna Meyer ([17:11](#)):

It's beautiful. Really fun. Okay. So I want to ask you a little bit more about being a female leader, because one thing that I have noticed as I've watched your Ted talk and just interacted with you in person, is that you bring a decidedly feminine presence to your interactions, and I think a lot of women leaders struggle with how they present themselves publicly. They may have gotten feedback that they're too feminine. They're not decisive or forceful enough, or when they are forceful, they get negative feedback that they're mannish or aggressive for being that way. I think that's a common struggle that women leaders face. And yet you unabashedly bring a feminine presence to any kind of personal or public engagement. I'm wondering how you found an authentic voice that worked for you.

Nancy Duarte ([17:59](#)):

I love that question, and I think I always was the outside consultant, so I never felt like I was accountable to anyone but myself. So in client situations, I could just show up and be me and nobody ever coached me. I also feel like that was a problem, a bit, as my organization scaled, I actually wished someone had paused and grabbed me by the shoulder and coached me, because I am really driven, really decisive. So I've had to learn even to soften how I show up at work.

I've always heard stories about women being coached, and then I got coached myself. And then now I've had to coach other women even on my team and even how they show up so they will be more effective. It's really about your presence. And it's really interesting because I think in some ways, women are given a bad rap, to your point. Well, you sound shrill, or you sound this or you're too bossy and all of those things, and I'm hoping that the pendulum will be flipping and the same expectation that's put on men will be also fair to women.

I'm 67% female as an organization. So I have a lot of women folk who... That has its ups and downs too, and I'm just super committed. So I've worked for and been on the board of organizations that help women move up. One's called Upward Women, and it's a very powerful organization founded by a Christian woman actually. It's growing very fast and I just believe that women need a voice. And some don't show up well, and so I've coached other women in my organization and how they show up and help them. And I try to say, this is a buff and polish. This isn't, you need to be massively different. But when my team is working with the top executives in the world, so how we show up has to be maybe of a caliber that some can and some just can't do. Yeah. That was a long wandering answer to your question.

Joanna Meyer ([20:09](#)):

I love it. As a consultant, I bet you can observe many women who are leading different organizations. What wisdom could you offer for women that may be struggling to find their voice? Are there ways that they can start to begin to observe themselves, to begin to gain strength and confidence in how they present themselves?

Nancy Duarte ([20:26](#)):

I think coaches are a good thing. We have a set of speaker coaches, which is also different from a presence, someone who actually does presence. I've gotten to sit in a room with some of the most powerful women. And I think one of the things they operate by is it very much looks like the nine gifts of the spirit, like patience, listening, speaking, and like a lot of my friends I admire the most, they'll maybe only say four sentences in a meeting, but the whole room just sounds like all the oxygen got sucked out of it. So I think there's wisdom in constraint, and there's wisdom in also demanding that you're heard. So I have never had that thing where women are cut off and men talk over them and all of that stuff, until I joined an authors group.

And these are best-selling non-fiction authors. If I rattled them off, you'd be gasping. And I gasp on myself every time I get to meet with this team. Two times a month, we're having evening calls and have for a while. And I noticed that the women like Jennifer will answer a question, but she'll get the floor. And then she passes it to me. Well, I really want to hear what Nancy has to say about narrative. Or Whitney will say I really want to know what Nancy... And I was oh, that's so nice. And then I go, just to speak and sure enough, boom, dude dive bombs right in, even though they said my name passed the microphone to me, the metaphorical microphone, I was shocked. And so this is the first time I've actually seen a group that I was in, where that mechanism needed to be part of it.

So I do think if you're in groups or you understand, or you're sitting at an exec table or sitting in a boardroom, whatever is the situation, I do think the women have to support each other more than I ever would have dreamed because I've never been in a situation like this where everyone didn't get their own diplomatic perspective shared, and so it's been new for me. And I was like, what? Someone just dive bombed in, even though they called on me? I was so surprised and it happens all the time. So I just think it's interesting to demand your voice. And so, yeah, it's weird.

Joanna Meyer ([22:43](#)):

Okay. I really agree with you, because I've heard groups like women in the Obama administration did something similar where they would hear the comments that a woman would make, amplify it, repeat it, just reinforcing and creating a space for women's voices to be heard. It's a beautiful picture. I think we could all get better at doing that. So I want to ask you a little bit about weathering the season. I had something bad happened recently and a friend looked at me and said, yep, it's 2020. This is what this year has been like. And I think we're all struggling for various reasons. But I want to ask you a little bit about resilience, which is the theme of today's event. And I'm wondering, you've owned a business for 30 years, so you've had significant ups and downs. You talked about the dot com bubble bursting and how hard that was. What have you learned about being resilient as a business leader? And second, I'm going to just ask you personally, but let's start at a high level. What have you learned about being resilient in business?

Nancy Duarte ([23:35](#)):

I think you have to prepare, I mean, the economy goes through economic cycles. So part of the resilience that we had is really being wise about, what does the scripture say? Watch the ant and how they behave and be like them. And so part of what my husband and I have always done is prepared and saved and those kinds of things. That isn't necessarily resilience, but in COVID, I've had to show up and show up strong, show up clear, and it was the weirdest set of emotions. I would be maybe out on my veranda, sketching out our beautiful new, strategic future and I'm all amped up and then have to come in and send a video memo to the employees, and I know they're feeling this way, and then I have a podcast and I'm like that. And then I have to have a difficult performance conversation.

I can't even believe my highest highs and lowest lows were so big. My husband was, can you move back into your own office because your days are overwhelming, like crazy. And I think not to flip the orders of your questions, but I actually think my resilience comes from when I was a little girl, because I was raised by a bipolar, a narcissistic mother. And she left when I was 16, abandoned the kids, and I took over the house. I took over the laundry. I took over the shopping. I just kept everything going, because my dad traveled a lot. And I just knew that I wanted a different life for myself than I had. I knew that I knew that I knew if I did the opposite then or different from what was portrayed to me, that it would lead to a better future.

And so I went to one year of college and dropped out and got married very young, which I don't recommend to everyone, but I got the luck of the draw in my husband.

Joanna Meyer ([25:20](#)):

You did. You got a good one.

Nancy Duarte ([25:21](#)):

Yeah, I got a really good one. And so I had to be resilient. And so I came down to the Silicon Valley with no education. And this whole Valley is made on the backs of MBAs and engineers, and just started to show up into CEO's office and say you're framing that incorrectly. Let's say it this way. Let's message it that way. And when you stand up, talk like this and it was because I'm a lifelong learner. So if you look at the quest, nobody questioned me. I showed up and I had read all the latest strategic books, the latest marketing books, the latest sales books, the latest business management books, the latest operations book, every issue of HBR that was ever issued.

So it wasn't that I was a failure as a learner. I just wanted out of my house more desperately than I wanted to be in college, and so I think that you have a choice when things are thrown your way, you have a choice. You get to be a victim, or you get to be a victor. And I think storytelling has really helped me cope with it because I could be, oh, I was dealt another blow. Oh, this is just the messy middle. I'm going to learn from it. And I'm going to emerge transformed when the third act happens. I just frame everything as, oh, this is just the messy middle. If I make the right decisions and really work on my own heart and my own perspective, I will emerge changed from it, and that's become like a coping mechanism for me.

So my resilience comes from, there is a brighter future and it's one I can create. It's one as being the image of God and in his likeness, God created the entire earth. What he said, He just was like, let there be. We have that same power as being in his likeness. Let there be an alternate future even for myself. And so I think that's where the resilience comes from. And when we went through COVID, me being resilient and not being afraid made a really big difference. I've not been afraid. I'm going through this confident that our strategy is right, confident that we're making the right financial decisions, even though they'd been difficult. We've done 20 people just over 20 people, we had to let go. They're hurt. And I was hurt. I'm hurt. That hurt me to do that, but it had to be done to save the whole. So we've shown up strong. My whole exec team has showed up strong and I'm really proud of how everyone has showed up in this season.

Joanna Meyer ([27:43](#)):

So a recent report came out from McKinsey and Lean In looking at... They do an annual report on women in the workforce, and the recent report for 2020 estimated that as many as one in four women may be choosing to leave the workforce because of the pressures they're experiencing right now in this season. I know that you have had seasons of intensity, both as a mother and executive where you had to figure out how in the world am I going to carry all these responsibilities? What insight or encouragement can you offer to women that are probably watching today that start their work week and just feel that overwhelm of trying to figure out home education, maintaining their career, keeping up with just family responsibilities. What encouragement would you offer them?

Nancy Duarte ([28:24](#)):

I'm in a different CEO groups. And we talk about this all the time, because if we could, we would rescue all these moms in some way and help them with childcare, and we can't do that. We're still shelter in place here in California. And so it's been really hard on the moms. As an entrepreneur, I had a decade where I only got one four hour cycle of sleep. I don't recommend it, but I did it because I was building and raising my kids at the same time. And so it can be done. I don't recommend it. My most encouraging thing is this will end. That's one of the most encouraging things. We are trying to do a lot for our women specifically, but anybody who's a parent in this season, I gave them all permission to show up, not their hundred percent best and no consequences of that. They're going to have kids crawling and there'll be, got to go.



The kid barfed, I don't care. And their output's going to be a little lower and I'm like permission to be imperfect, amplifying that meant a lot to the team. I got a lot of notes when I made that declaration. And so I think if we could learn to do that for ourselves, because I think especially anyone probably listening to this, they're in either a position of power, of leadership, or they manage or they might not have even been interested in the content. And I think we have to cut each other a lot of slack right now. And high performing women have a really high expectations. I just was having a conversation with one of my gals yesterday. She's had a baby and she's just coming back and she's having a really hard time juggling, and I'm like permission to be imperfect.

You're not going to kill it. You're used to killing it. Let's just not kill it for a while, and then you get to kill it again. It's just the season of not being able to be perfect. And I'm okay with that. And I think all of us need to give our friends, our families, our kids, our employees, even our leadership, give your leadership permission to be imperfect and it'll relieve some of your stress. So I think that would be my answer to that.

Joanna Meyer ([30:29](#)):

Thanks for the gift of grace. Thanks for the gift of your time and input in our event today. What can we be praying for you about, in your leadership?

Nancy Duarte ([30:37](#)):

Oh, that's really nice. I would actually prefer if people will pray for my team, for their own resilience, for their own wisdom to navigate, and then even the ones where they suffered, having to be laid off in this season, especially for them. I know it hurt them. So I think I would prefer that. My husband and I have a pretty rich and strong discipline of prayer and we actually, I don't know why I prefer to give prayer than receive them, but that would delight me if anyone thinks... We call ourselves the duortions. So if anyone wants to pray for the duortions, that would be helpful.

Joanna Meyer ([31:16](#)):

And we will. We would love to. Thanks for the gift of your leadership and your friendship today. We really appreciate it

Nancy Duarte ([31:22](#)):

Thank you so much.

Speaker 2 ([31:27](#)):

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