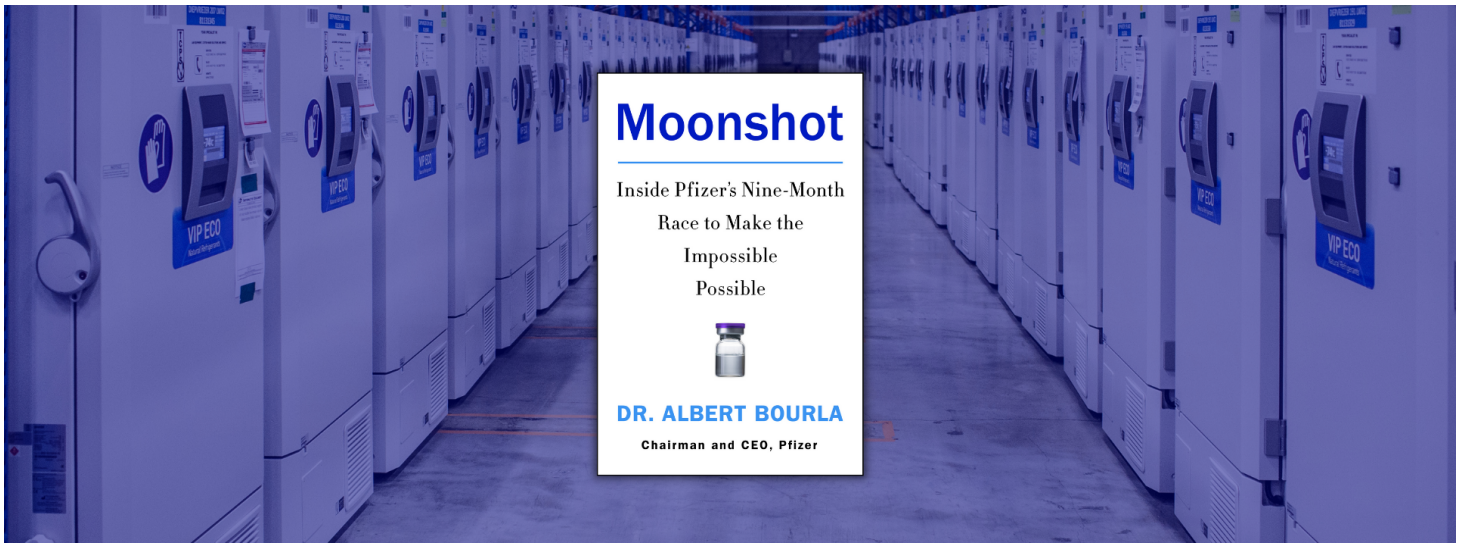
The Meaning of Moonshot: Lessons in Leadership to Last a Lifetime

Tuesday, March 8, 2022



ON TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2019, Chinese authorities alerted the World Health Organization to a mysterious virus causing pneumonia-like illness in a small cluster of patients in the city of Wuhan. Shortly after, the novel virus was identified as SARS-CoV-2. Less than a year later, on Tuesday, December 8, 2020, nearly ninety-one-year-old Margaret Keenan received a Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine shot at England's Coventry University Hospital and became the first person in the world to be vaccinated against the virus causing the most devastating pandemic of the last one hundred years using messenger RNA (mRNA) technology. Wearing a cheerful Christmas sweater, she received a standing ovation from nurses and hospital workers as she was rolled through the hallway in a wheelchair.

I never thought I would author a book – and certainly not in a language other than my native Greek –but Pfizer's path to creating a breakthrough COVID-19 vaccine became an

important chapter in human history, and I felt compelled to share details of our nine-month mission that led to that remarkable day.

Moonshot is a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges we faced bringing a vaccine to the world, the lessons we learned along the way, and the core values that united us in the battle against disease.

These are a few of the important lessons I will carry with me for many years to come. My hope is that they – and this book – will inspire and inform your own moonshot, whatever that may be.

Set impossible goals

Developing this vaccine was really an effort to “make the impossible possible.”

Setting bold goals can be intimidating, but, often, our problem is not that we aim too high and miss, it is that we aim low and hit. At Pfizer, we learned that by focusing on our purpose, knowing what truly matters, and being willing to work as a team, we could accomplish what no one thought possible.

Moonshot is a testament to the value of teamwork. Our incredible team at Pfizer and our collaboration with BioNTech were critical in the vaccine development effort. However, the term “working together” does not sufficiently describe the unprecedented collaboration we saw across the entire biopharma ecosystem.

Embracing cooperation and collaboration – especially in a crisis – was instrumental to finding a solution.

Every life is precious

Patients are not data points.

Every patient is a person, and every person is someone to somebody – a mother, a sibling, a friend. When COVID-19 hit, we felt Pfizer had an obligation to use science, technology and the resources we had at our disposal to find a solution as quickly as possible.

We knew that every day the world went by without a vaccine, more lives were lost, and more people continued to suffer from COVID-19. The hopes of billions were resting on our science, and knowing that saving lives was what mattered most, inspired us and helped

see us through.

Time is life

This attitude was the most important success factor.

Speed was critical. In March 2020, I pushed our team to have a vaccine ready by the fall, when cases were expected to spike again. To achieve this, it was clear that incremental improvements would not move the needle. We needed to completely rethink the way we operated.

When you ask people to do something in eight years that normally takes 10, they will find it challenging, but they will think of solutions within the current process. If you ask them to make 300 million doses instead of 200 million (that was our current annual capacity at that time), they will find it hard but will investigate solutions that improve the current way of doing things.

I didn’t ask people to do it in eight years. I asked them to do it in eight months. I didn’t ask them to make 300 million doses. I asked them to make three billion doses. I insisted that these targets were not negotiable. Saving as many lives as soon as possible was our priority. The team recognized this, went back to the drawing board and came back with a completely new way of working – and the results were simply phenomenal.

The value of a purpose-driven culture

Our purpose guides us in all that we do.

At Pfizer, our success stems from the way colleagues at every level embrace our purpose: Breakthroughs that change patients’ lives. We imbue this in everything we do at the company by asking ourselves three critical questions:

Am I being true to our purpose? In all industries, companies that stay true to their purpose perform far better than those that do not. Have I aimed high enough? Setting goals that are very aspirational, goals that someone has never achieved before, can unleash human creativity in phenomenal ways. Do I have the right mindset? Every member of our team answered these questions affirmatively during our quest to make the impossible possible.
Ultimately, I wrote Moonshot to share my faith in science with the public. I firmly believe that if more people understood the power of science to achieve once-unimaginable things, they would have faith in our collective ability to tackle society’s biggest problems.

While, yes, it is my name on the cover of this book, nothing that it describes would have happened without the involvement of so many colleagues; partners; stakeholders and now friends, as well as all those around the world that volunteered for our clinical trials. I – and the world – owe a huge debt of gratitude to them all.

Order your copy of Moonshot, available on Mach 8, 2022. All proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to charity.

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