A diplomat and an executive wrote the book on why your power needs purpose – literally

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Kevin Wolf

Melanne Verveer and Kim Azzarelli seen at the Seneca Women Global Leadership Forum at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, on Wednesday, April 15, 2015, in Washington. (Photo by Kevin Wolf/Invision for Seneca Women/AP Images)

The idea hit when Melanne Verveer and Kim Azzarelli realized they were part of a growing trend.

Both are highly accomplished, with careers that have hit the upper echelons of business and politics. And they used that success to build Seneca Women, a global leadership forum to advance women and girls.

But they weren’t the only women trying to make the world better. They
both saw the rising number of female leaders who were also influencing change, whether in the world or in the workplace. And they felt there was a larger story to be told.

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“You had so many more women, at all levels, being in more positions where they could make a difference. And yet the story in many ways was not fully comprehended or not grasped in a way that it needed to be grasped,” said Verveer, former ambassador-at-large for global women’s Issues at the U.S. State Department and director of Georgetown University’s Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

From her international work with former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Verveer had seen women across the globe form partnerships that crossed socioeconomic boundaries to better their communities and businesses.

“I saw the power of what we could do for each other,” Verveer said.

Azzarelli, a business and legal adviser and chair and co-founder of Cornell Law School’s Avon Global Center for Women and Justice, said the thought that only CEOs and top-level positions have influence is “an antiquated idea.”

“Oftentimes we feel we don’t have power. But we each have to understand our own strengths,” she said. “Power is a practical ability to affect change and having control over your own life.”

"Fast Forward" is a compilation of data and interviews with women who had their own realizations about power, and subsequently infused their work with a sense of purpose. Azzarelli, for example, had her own wake-up call while working as a corporate secretary at Avon in 2005.

In the book, she details a conversation with a surgeon friend who had returned from treating children in Cambodia. Azzarelli’s friend had performed surgery on victims of acid attacks, a disfiguring form of punishment used in Cambodia.

The surgeon’s story upset Azzarelli so much that she wanted to use her
Melanne Verveer, Kim Azzarelli want women to know their power - Bizwomen

legal training to do something about it. This led to the Avon Global Center for Women and Justice at Cornell.

“I was so driven by the purpose of helping these acid violence victims, I went outside my comfort zone,” she said.

The book is full of similar stories. Azzarelli said people often think they need to work at a nonprofit organization to make a difference, but women in corporate jobs can have just as much influence, if not more. And the year-and-a-half-long writing process taught Azzarelli to view success as something that goes beyond getting the corner office.

“For me, the interviews plus the research reinforces this concept that if you focus on purpose, you’ll find more fulfillment,” she said. “The leaders who really are making a difference are putting people first.”

Azzarelli said the need for fulfilling work is not exclusive to women, and "Fast Forward” features interviews with men, as well.

In stereotypical gender roles, men are expected to go to work and earn money to support a family at home. As more women fill leadership positions, Azzarelli said they have the opportunity to change what those roles mean. Work doesn’t have to be all about making money. And Azzarelli said studying women’s behavior could open up a broader conversation about the way work is thought about in general.

“There is this new moment where we could redesign our value set,” she said.

"Fast Forward” concludes with a “toolkit” to help readers evaluate their own work and purpose. Verveer said the resources apply to women at all levels, from grassroots to C-suite, because change can come from anywhere.

“Know your power. Know it’s there,” Verveer said. “Find your purpose, what really motivates you to bring about these types of changes.”

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