



Episode 158 - Maximos Lih

EPISODE SUMMARY (AI-generated – may contain errors)

Recorded on 2026-07-28, this episode of The Leadership Window with Dr. Patrick Jinks and leadership coach/consultant Maximos Lih tackles the real work of scaling mission-driven organizations. They contrast venture-backed startup growth with nonprofit realities and show why adding headcount and processes without evolving leadership, culture, and the founder's role stalls progress. The conversation introduces practical ways to “scale your story” for donors and impact investors, build distributed leadership, and apply AI to reclaim time and reduce tactical bottlenecks. For executives and boards, it offers a blueprint to move from heroic problem-solving to systems, metrics, and values that multiply impact.

IN THIS EPISODE

- Why capacity isn't the core problem: growth stalls when decision-making bottlenecks and culture lag behind added people and processes.
- The founder's shift: moving from proximity to every decision to distributed leadership, promoting from within, and trusting new leaders to own systems.
- Scaling with people vs. systems vs. process: how to focus based on your stage of growth and predictability—and avoid the “hero leader” trap.
- Financing realities: venture capital vs. impact investing vs. grants and debt, with clear expectations for metrics and community ROI in the social sector.

- “Scale your story” for donors (including tech audiences): outcomes, integrity, community ROI, and avoiding legacy-centric appeals in favor of budgeting generosity.
- Designing immersive experiences for empathy: bringing stakeholders closer to the mission to deepen engagement beyond transactional giving.
- Using AI to reclaim time and build an organizational “brain” that captures knowledge, standardizes quality, trains new hires, and tests strategic capacity.

KEY LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS

1. Where am I the primary bottleneck in decision-making, and what must change for me to trust leaders to own systems and outcomes without my constant involvement?
2. Are we currently scaling with people, systems, or processes—and does that match our stage of growth, level of predictability, and cultural readiness?
3. Are we telling the right, metrics-backed story to the right stakeholders so donors, partners, and boards see themselves in the future we are building?

NOTABLE MOMENTS

00:00 — Framing scaling beyond headcount: the real issue is bottlenecks and culture

00:54 — Old guard vs. new guard dynamics and rising complexity as teams grow

03:15 — Venture-backed startup scale vs. nonprofit scale: different rules, similar leadership challenges

04:09 — Distinguishing scaling with people, systems, and processes

07:40 — The founder’s identity shift: from proximity to distributed leadership

10:25 — Financing vehicles in the social sector and why ROI looks different

14:20 — Impact investing expectations and metrics discipline (Emerson Collective; Gates Foundation context)

18:45 — Community ROI narrative with long-horizon examples (e.g., early childhood development)

22:10 — “Scale your story” for tech donors: values, outcomes, and the world we aim to build

26:35 — Why legacy appeals fall flat; budgeting generosity and practicing abundance

30:55 — Designing immersive experiences that build empathy and solidarity with the mission

01:05 — Using AI to reduce presentation time and test strategic capacity

02:45 — Building an AI “company brain” and adding accountability and judgment layers

GUEST

Executive Coach and founder of Emboldened LLC, Maximos Lih’s leadership story traces back to his grandfather, an orphan who taught himself to read and eventually rose to become a four-star general in the Chinese military. Years after his grandfather’s retirement, strangers would approach the family with stories and gratitude for how “the General” had impacted their lives. From him, Maximos learned that true greatness is measured in how you make people feel.

After immigrating to America, Maximos carried that lesson forward. As he navigated a new world with English as his second language, he quickly recognized the power individuals have to shape the energy of a room. We can choose to foster kindness, excellence, and belonging, or exclusion and mockery. He committed himself to the former, a choice that has guided his journey ever since.

After graduating from UC Berkeley, Maximos was hired at Google as a data specialist in technical recruiting. His mandate: bring in the best engineers without scaling to mediocrity. That work propelled him into the startup world and later to Google Ventures, where he helped hundreds of founders scale their companies and leadership. He witnessed Uber grow from 80 to 500 employees in six months, supported Flatiron Health through a billion-dollar exit, and learned that high-performing teams must be built like Olympic teams—driven by mission, rare talent, and deep trust.

After nearly a decade at Google Ventures, Maximos now shares those lessons with the next generation of leaders, helping small teams scale without losing their edge and ensuring more people have the opportunity to thrive.

RESOURCES MENTIONED

- [linkedin.com/in/maximoslih](https://www.linkedin.com/in/maximoslih)
- Emerson Collective
- Gates Foundation
- 1951 Coffee
- Blue Bottle Coffee
- Nest
- Uber
- Slack
- Amazing Grace (film)
- Never Split the Difference by Chris Voss
- The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey (via Covey’s trust formula)
- Dr. Jim Smith, Leadership Systems
- ChatGPT

- Claude / Claude Plus
- Entrepreneurial Operating System (EOS)

FINAL LISTENER TAKEAWAY

Scaling well means evolving from adding capacity to building distributed leadership and systems, backed by a compelling, metrics-driven story—so your organization can create impact even when you are not in the room.

