



For headhunter Peter Ressler, the September 11 attacks brought a new fulfillment to his work.

As I walked down the avenue of my wounded city, mangled steel bars twisted up to the sky where the Twin Towers once stood.

It was October 18, 2001. My whole world had come tumbling down with those buildings. Not only did I feel the sadness of all those around me, a new helplessness gripped me that I never experienced before. Me, a trained martial artist, seasoned Wall Street businessman, tough-minded headhunter, born and bred in Brooklyn. I suddenly felt ineffective.

My executive search firm represented some of the most prestigious firms on Wall Street. My job was to find and attract talented money makers for my clients. I was known in the industry as the “pistol,” the guy who could get things done fast. When I set my mind on something, I was relentless. My favorite saying was, “I’ll never quit. You will have to kill me first.”

But now, witnessing the death and destruction around me, I lost my drive to succeed for the first time in my career.

Aside from my Wall Street connections, I was closely involved with New York City firefighters. Father Mychal Judge, chaplain of the FDNY and the first official casualty of the attack, was a personal friend. Beyond that, I had hired many active members of the New York Fire Department to work for a real estate development business that my wife, Monika, and I had built.

This walk, coming five weeks after the terrorist attack that killed my friends and colleagues, caused me to question the value of two decades of doing business here. For 21 years, I had worked in these haunts, closed countless deals and generated millions of dollars of revenues on these now-unrecognizable blocks. In the face of this senseless suffering, I wondered what purpose my work served anymore. I needed answers but none came, only questions. How could I go on with business as usual?

I reluctantly left Ground Zero that evening, and near my Long Island home ran into a neighbor wearing a T-shirt from the local volunteer fire department. “Are you a firefighter?” I asked him. He said he was and told me the only requirement needed to join the department was the desire to help others. It was the stimulus I needed at the age of 46 to defy logic and join the ranks of those

noble foot soldiers that saved my city. Suddenly I had a real way to give back and help those fallen. The next few months I would travel between work (endless stories from colleagues of those missing and dead) and firefighter boot camp. It gave me a connection to my friends digging at the site and to other friends at the bottom of the sites heap. It helped me feel useful, somehow stronger.

It was damned hard too. Before I started, I thought I was in great physical shape. I was wrong. It took all of my strength to carry a set of irons and 50 pounds of breathing equipment up a 75-foot ladder in full gear. The sessions knocked me out for days afterward. I poured myself into training and building up physically. It seemed to substitute for the weakness I felt emotionally.

Sometimes the contrasts in my life were stark. At fire school, the instructor taught things like: "Always look out for your brothers." Back in the search business, bankers routinely pronounced: "I won't consider anything less than 2 million." I began to look for a way to reconcile the oath I took as a fire-fighter "to protect the life and property of the community" with the unspoken code I picked up in my years in business: "Profit at any cost."

As things began to return to the ease and comfort I knew before, I felt a strong need to find a deeper purpose in my work. The answer I searched for came through an unexpected phone call: "Hey Pete, you changed my life," said the trader at the other end. I was blown away. "I did?" "Hell yeah. If it wasn't for you, I would never have worked here."

I suddenly saw my duty in my work differently. I affected peoples lives directly, just as a firefighter did. Maybe not in the

same way, but in my own way. My work had importance after all. It changed people's lives for the better.

Therefore I had a responsibility in my work to honor this silent code. I no longer looked at my business as simply making money. Now I saw it as a vocation, a calling, if you will. Through my work, I was obligated to protect and enhance the livelihoods and careers of my colleagues. It had a ring like the code of the firefighter. Instead of viewing each search as simply an opportunity to profit, I would now accept assignments only from clients who practiced the highest moral and ethical standards.

September 11 taught me that at any moment our lives could be irrevocably changed. It is the difference a day can make in our life, any day where something extraordinary happens. In order for my work not to be trivial, I needed to find a deeper meaning for it. I want to know that I live every day with purpose, just like a firefighter.

As I wake up groggy in the middle of the night to help save a neighbor's house, I have learned to incorporate these same principles of responsibility and concern for others into my everyday work life. For me, it will never be business as usual again.

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