

Survive
Thrive
or Dive

Defining the Company's W5

Establishing a company's vision becomes a rallying point for getting people to follow the same roadmap. There are, however, a few challenges. If the leadership provides an infrastructure that is too complex, the employees may find it too difficult to participate in the process, so won't feel that they have contributed. If the infrastructure is too generic, that in of itself suggests a lack of directional leadership. The business gurus on the lecture circuits back in the 90's came up with a quick fix for this problem. They started espousing that companies should define their vision in a catchy phrase of no more than a dozen words. One of the reasons for limiting the vision to a dozen words was, supposedly, so that the vision was distilled to its purest and simplest form. Another reason was so that everyone in the company would conceivably memorize it. The lecture circuit gurus called this distillation of words a "mission statement".

I'm all for mission statements and I've helped many business owners develop their own personalized statement of purpose. But if a company expects to hire a consultant to come up with a catchy set of words that represents a secret formula that's supposed to inspire, motivate, and accelerate the company's employees into the stratosphere of synergy and business success, then the whole exercise is going to crash and burn unless the employees are part of the formulation process. All too often, a company hires a consultant, who then works with just the executive management team to create a sacred edict called "*The Mission Statement*" which is quickly engraved on a plaque and then prominently displayed in the front foyer of the company's reception area.

Can you see the missing ingredient in the formula? You'll notice from the previous paragraph that a mission statement is created by the *executive management team*, without the input of the *employees*. In essence, once this creative masterpiece is finished and engraved in bronze for all the customers to see, most of the time the employees can't even quote it, much less understand it. If the employees don't know what the mission statement says, much less understand what it means, then the company would be better off telling its employees some pablum-like statements such as "*everyone needs to look after the customer*" and "*everyone needs to have the company's best interest at heart*".

By the mid 90's everyone was embracing the words "mission statement" as the latest and greatest of Corporate America's thoroughbred stable of buzzwords. Yet most employers who brought on consultants to help create a mission statement (or who

made the effort to develop one on their own) never saw the benefits that the lecture circuit gurus promised were suppose to arise from this effort. Why? Because whatever catchy phrases the executive teams across America came up with never evoked an emotional response in the hearts of their workforces. Rather than expressing an idea that encapsulates the vision and purpose of the company (*rhema*), these mission statements became nothing more than words on a plaque (*logos*).

The reason for this was because in most cases, management simply presented the new mission statement as a finished product (typically with an unveiling of the plaque, complete with drum roll and fanfare) and then – nothing. It became an exercise in futility. If the mission statement failed to convey some sort of *rhema* to the employees, then the entire process was ineffective at best and meaningless at worst. Even assuming the employees were expected to memorize these wonderful words of wisdom, the exercise would still be futile if management never invested the time, energy, emotion and effort to teach their people the *significance* behind the mission statement.

Done properly, a mission statement should represent the heart and soul of a company. It doesn't represent "what" a company does, it represents the "why" behind the "what". It should be a reflection of purposeful consideration, from all parts of the corporate body, which every employee can stand in unity and agree upon. It's a statement of what your people believe in, and what they're prepared to guard and protect. When it comes to being purposeful, a great rule of thumb for developing the infrastructure of a mission statement is to apply the W5 approach.

The W5 approach gets everyone to purposely consider the who, what, when, where and why of the company's vision. *Who* are you supposed to be serving? *What* is it you're supposed to be doing for them? *When* is it to be done? *Where* is your market niche? And finally, the aspect of corporate vision and purpose that is most overlooked: *Why* are we even doing this?

By having your people do some brainstorming into what they think the W5 purpose of the company is, you will get some invaluable feedback of who your people see themselves as being in the corporate world. You will most likely also receive some surprises that help you diagnose the attitudinal vitality signs of your workforce. In using the W5 approach on behalf of our clients, when we survey employees we've all too often received a genre of comments (*anonymously of course*) that give the following "insights" as to what the workforce perceives as the "purpose" of the business as being reflected to them from the elevated offices of the executive suites:

WHO: *our function is to work for the boss – nobody else*

* the "when" factor for architects can be years, whereas for fire fighters it would be "NOW"

WHAT: *make as much as possible, as quickly as possible, for as little as possible, then sell it for as big a profit margin as possible*

WHEN: *on time, every time, as long as that time suits us*

WHERE: *where ever we can find people stupid enough to pay us*

WHY: *I have no idea, other than to make money*

Granted, when you allow for anonymous comments, you'll always have contributions from the disgruntled in the ranks. To ignore this genre of comments, however, is to turn a blind eye to the factors which might be inhibiting the company from thriving. When comments such as these arise, it's often an indication that certain attitudes were communicated from within management's ranks to illicit these kinds of responses.

While you might not be excited about every opinion and perspective you receive from employees in a W5 solicitation for input, inviting comments from your people is crucial. Some business owners prefer to create the whole mission statement themselves, justifying that when all the rhetoric is over, it is *their* company. True enough, but if their mission statement is created without the input of the very people who are supposed to exemplify it, then the whole process becomes an exercise in futility. In the hearts and minds of the rank and file, whatever words get composed to create a catchy phrase, those words will have no personal significance to the average employee. If the words of such a mission statement can't translate a concept of vision or express an idea of purpose, employees will be unable to establish an emotional commitment to it. It will simply be logos – no deeper meaning, no significance, nothing inspirational and nothing motivational. Just words.

So let's consider a slight change by changing the word "a" to "your" and using capital letters to signify importance. What I'm trying to communicate is not grammatical but conceptual. Don't think in terms of simply writing "a mission statement" rather think in terms of creating *Your Mission Statement*. Can you sense the difference? Your Mission Statement should be the battle cry of your company, it's the *raison d'etre** which all members of the workforce will enthusiastically stand behind and defend. If your Mission Statement is going to have this kind of rhema significance for your troops, then they must be inspired by the words. Being inspired, however, doesn't just come from the power of the words, it comes from the power of the living example behind the words.

As their leader, that would be you. You have to inspire them, by exemplifying the rhema behind the words. So let's talk about leadership.

* French for "reason for being"

If you want to be a leader of people, rather than just a manager of employees, then I would like to share one of the mottos we like to use for what it takes to develop leadership. Although there are many ingredients that go into the making of a great leader, I am going to suggest that the first and most important rule is the adage:

Good leaders lead by example, by leading the way.

This motto came to mind after I read an inspirational story about a World War II British officer whose mission was to train his men to jump off an infantry landing craft (LCI) as it hit the beach at Normandy. After hitting the beach, his men were supposed to run up and dig themselves into position then start shooting at the enemy, drawing their fire so that the other thousands of allied troops who were coming right behind them during the Normandy Invasion Offensive would not be mowed down by enemy fire. The problem was – as this officer’s men would be first to hit the beach, they were going to be first in the line of fire. If they couldn’t establish themselves and nullify the enemy’s fire, the entire offensive would fail. Those who landed first, were literally sitting ducks.

Yet this was their mission – their purpose was to draw enemy fire. But to get “there” from “here” meant that *predictably*, there were going to be many casualties and that these frontrunners were literally expected to put their lives on the line. The officers training these 18 and 19 year old enlisted men knew that because most of these young soldiers had never seen active combat and had never been shot at before, that they would likely be immobilized by fear. This was a *predictable* reality that was also in the mind of the officer from this story. Bearing this reality in mind, for a number of weeks prior to the invasion, every time this officer was given his ration of coffee and sugar, he would put the sugar cubes in his breast pocket and drink his coffee black. When his men asked him what he was doing with all these sugar cubes, he just smiled and said nothing.

In the early morning hours of June 6, 1944, as this officer and his men were about to land at Normandy, he started popping sugar cube after sugar cube into his mouth, and continued to do this as he shouted words of encouragement to his men as the moment to hit the beach drew near. When their LCI landed, this officer was the first to jump onto shore, run up the beach and dig himself in, taking enemy fire while he continued to shout back words of encouragement to his men. Many lives were lost, including that of this officer, but what came out of the testimonies of those enlisted men who served under this great leader and survived that gruesome day serves as a testament to leaders everywhere about the value of “showing the way”.

The men under the command of this leader who “showed the way” spoke of how

motivated they were to literally follow in his footsteps, and how inspired they were by the living example of their commanding officer, who by rank could have stayed behind but instead chose to serve the needs of his men first, by putting himself in the line of fire. These survivors later found out that the reason their leader had saved his sugar cubes was to “pump himself up” into a sugar high so that he would have an extra burst of energy to continue to shout words of encouragement to his men while he was being shot at, knowing full well that he expected to die on the beach because he would be the first to engage enemy fire.

This is what it means to say “*Good leaders lead by example, by leading the way*”. Regrettably, although I have met more than a thousand business owners and managers over the years, I have met very few business leaders who could be described as having shared their vision and purpose for their company with their people, and fewer still who had the foresight of the officer in this story to provide their people with training and encouragement so that they could reach the final destination. Ever since “mission statement” erupted on the business scene as the newest buzzword in the early 1990’s whenever I’ve been a conference speaker where the audience has been comprised entirely of business owners and managers, I have polled the attendees and asked how many of them have a mission statement.

Of those who raise their hands, I ask them if they would be willing to stand. Of those who willingly take to their feet, I propose this challenge:

“If you can recite your Mission Statement, please remain standing.”

And guess what? They sit down. Why? Because these owners and managers, who presumably conceived their own mission statement and have posted it on a plaque in their reception area for everyone to see – can’t even quote it themselves.

So here’s a challenge for every reader who is the owner or CEO of a company. Do you *have* a Mission Statement? If so, does it *embody* the principles and goals that you desire your company to be known for? Will fulfilling this Mission Statement result in a *legacy* for your life in the hearts and minds of your family, co-workers and your community? If the answer is yes to all these things, then the last challenge I have for you is this: more than just being able to *quote* your Mission Statement, can you then *explain* what it means to someone who is unfamiliar with your company?

If you can’t, there’s no condemnation. Rest assured, you’re in very good company. During the past two decades of presenting this challenge to business owners, CEO’s and senior managers, I have had less than a handful of business leaders from my audiences be able to quote their mission statement and explain its significance. We’re

not talking about employees here, we're talking about the CEO's and business owners who are the very ones who are suppose to *lead by example!*

With globalization, outsourcing of jobs to foreign soil, the drop in the value of the dollar and accessibility of technological advances to non-Western countries that dilute, weaken and marginalize what was once our competitive advantage, things need to change if we are to maintain that advantage. The reality of the 21st century is that *change* is upon us, but *progress* is optional. Knowing that we need to change with the times is one thing, but knowing *how* to incorporate change so that our employees won't resist it due to doubt and fear is another. Maybe it's time we asked for help and were open to admitting that we could use a bit of direction. The greatest resource any company can have is the synergy of its people, to work cooperatively on an agreed upon vision with a commonality of purpose. If we ask ourselves whether or not our employees have a realistic understanding of what our vision and purpose is, and whether or not they have been trained and equipped to achieve the company's goals, then what we're really asking is whether we have positioned ourselves to *survive, thrive, or dive.*

Having asked yourself that question, here's a follow-up question with much deeper ramifications for every business owner: *Do you want to leave a legacy, or just a ledger sheet?* If you want your life to leave a legacy in the lives of those you lead, then you'll need to provide more than just a place where they go to earn a pay check; you'll need to create an environment that provides each of your people with a sense of purpose. That's when you'll transcend the pursuit of success, to pursue significance.

If you haven't done so already, then it's time to define the purpose of your business, to add personal significance to success on your list of goals, and to share some rhema words with your employees.

If you want to be a leader of people, rather than just a manager of employees, then I would like to suggest that the first and most important rule of leadership is that:

“Good leaders lead by example, by leading the way.”