

Debunking the Myths of Success

By Paul Huff

The road to success can exact a high toll from everyone in a business, even in today's booming economy. Top talent turnover, customer-service-rep apathy, and salesforce burnout are just a few of the bumps in the road that can force a company to make a wrong turn and fail to reach its desired destination.

Those obstacles don't appear through any real fault of employees; they're just following the road signs and trying to negotiate the treacherous curves. The obstacles result from an organizational belief in several myths of success that pervade business culture in the United States.

Certainly many companies—and individuals—succeed despite a steadfast belief in these myths. Unfortunately, those companies also pay too high a price in effort and burnout. Others, including such notable companies as Microsoft, Merck Pharmaceuticals, and Rodale Press, have looked beyond the myths to embrace truths that can lead to incredible success.

So, what are these myths that so often stand between companies or individuals and the accomplishment of their goals? And how can we get around them?

Myth 1: The harder you work, the better your result. This myth seems like an axiom—a given—to most people. It's derived from the American work ethic. Most people think that attaining success is an arduous and painful process, requiring extraordinary willpower, considerable time, and even self-denial. In reality, that's the way to create burnout, not success.

Yes, you need willpower to succeed, but willpower in and of itself almost always falls short because it doesn't last. Vilfredo Pareto, a turn-of-the-century Italian economist and statistician, developed the Pareto Principle (or 80:20 Rule), which states that 80 percent of your results come from only 20 percent of your effort. The secret is to find the right 20 percent to put forth. Better yet, find a way to make every effort more productive.

In working with clients, I've developed a system called Effortless Peak Performance that can help you couple willpower with a powerful mindset that

supports your desired outcomes. That coupling creates peak performance results that appear and feel effortless.

Think of it this way: You're in Antarctica observing an iceberg. The wind is blowing at 85 miles per hour in an easterly direction, pushing the iceberg along. The iceberg, however, is moving at only five miles per hour. Why? Because the current under the water is moving at 80 miles per hour in the opposite direction. In that analogy, the wind is your willpower—pushing, pushing, pushing. The current, which represents your subconscious mind, is moving in the other direction. If you make your efforts (the wind) congru-



ent with your beliefs (the current), you create a “with the wind” performance that feels much less difficult.

When you harness the power of your subconscious, you get a mental momentum that drives “with the wind” performance. Mental momentum can help you sustain success without the high price of intense effort. To harness that power, you must identify meaningful goals and then understand how your choices, habits, and beliefs support or diminish your efforts. That's where the second myth comes in.

Myth 2: Power, prestige, and security are ultimate goals. They sound like the American dream, don't they? For businesses, add the fourth—and sometimes overriding—goal of profit.

Upon closer examination, we see that those goals are hollow. They aren't the kind of “end game goals” that tap into employees' inner motivation, and they raise many questions: Why do we want power? What will prestige bring us? Security from

what? And how much profit is enough?

Although businesses and families need money to operate, as a goal it can exact a high price. It leads to low morale and high turnover, and sets your company up for failure.

Goals such as power, prestige, security, and, yes, profit come from a desire for survival. On the other hand, goals that focus on how we can make a difference and affect our customers' lives come from a desire for contribution. Those contributive goals increase self-esteem and create passionate work environments, tapping into humans' innate desire to help others.

Some of the most successful companies already know this, and put it into practice. Microsoft's mission is “to create software for the personal computer that empowers and enriches people in the workplace, at school, and at home.” Further, Microsoft wants its employees to “wake up every day with the passionate belief that their work is contributing to the evolution of technology and making a real difference to the lives of millions of people.”

Rodale Press operates under this credo: “We inspire and enable people to improve their lives and the world around them.” Its mission is “to show people how they can use the power of their bodies and minds to make their lives better.”

George W. Merck of Merck Pharmaceuticals outlines its philosophy: “We try never to forget that medicine is for the people. It is not for the profits. The profits follow, and if we have remembered that, they have never failed to appear.”

What's key is not that those ideas are expressed within the companies' mission statements, but that they pervade the whole culture of their workplaces. Which leads us to the last myth:

Myth 3: Develop a mission statement, and the hearts and minds of your workforce will follow. Some surveys suggest that as many as 87 percent of the American workforce are either causing problems or just looking to get a paycheck. But employees aren't naturally cynical, disillusioned, or apathetic. When my management-level clients complain about their workers' lack of motivation, I ask, “Who hired those apathetic, cynical, disillusioned, burned-out employees?”

Not surprisingly, no one raises a hand.

Naturally, the managers hired those employees. Something happened in the organization since hiring that made those employees the way they are. Corporations often respond to employees' cynicism or apathy by developing mission statements to inspire them. Unfortunately, there's no evidence that mission statements have any effect on organizations or the bottom line.

As leaders, you must do something different if you want to effect change in your organization. *Psychology Today* surveyed its readers recently, asking them what they wanted in a job. The number 1 response was a job "that makes me feel good about myself as a whole person." If readers of *Psychology Today* are representative of workers as a whole—and I think they are—then that energy is inside of our employees, just waiting to be tapped.

Our job as leaders is to kindle the fire, arouse the passion, and tie into the energy within our employees. We need to give them a crusade that will lift them up from

uninspired work. We don't need more mission statements; we need to create crusades.

If an organization's goals have meaning and its business makes employees feel they're making a difference in others' lives, the organization has captured the essence of Effortless Peak Performance. To do that, though, every interaction and communication within a company has to be considered and made consistent, or it will be just another management fad.

If a mission statement defines what a business does, a crusade defines how that translates into making a difference in the lives of others. A company's mission might be to develop, manufacture, and market pharmaceutical products; its crusade might be to preserve and improve human life. See the difference? Imagine how selling skills, customer service, or leadership style would change in that situation. Burnout would be a nonissue.

A crusade taps into what helps us to feel better about ourselves. We don't need

more mission statements or more work rules. We need crusades that put people on a mission.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "If a man hasn't discovered something he's willing to die for, he isn't fit to live." King was on a crusade—a cause that fired up the consciousness of a nation because it was something that really mattered. I'm not suggesting that we can or should create something worth dying for in our organizations, but I do suggest that defining our work in ways that make a difference in the lives of others can create something that employees will be excited to live for.

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