

Linking Purpose and People

BY ALLAN COX

To perform to its highest potential, an organization must hit the right note and make sure employees are singing from the same sheet of music. The mission statement gets everyone in tune.

ANY ORGANIZATION bent on high performance must find its own song and sing it out. This organizational resonance doesn't come from a corporate vision, typically conjured up by the CEO, but from the soul. Most often, a vision refers to a linear view of the future. In fact, the turbulent change most organizations face daily is decidedly nonlinear. "Half of the time you think you're right, you're wrong," says Rick Friedland, president and CEO of General Instrument.

Vision is still important, according to *Built To Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, by professors Jim Collins and Jerry Porras of Stanford Business School. But the book debunks a popular myth: Long-term performers get there through sophisticated, long-range, and strategic planning. Instead, the authors say that high-performing companies are distinguished by being in touch with their own authenticity—a quality one might call "soul." Such companies are adaptable and resilient. They're known for an opportunism energized by root values. Whether fledgling or mature, all organizations benefit from periodically contemplating their potential, as long as they're grounded by down-to-earth

marching orders—their mission.

So, for an organization to become resonant, it needs a soul-based mission that identifies its root values and establishes a purpose for all employees to experience. Loose though it may be, the mission sorts out the organization's core competencies and forms the basis for overall strategy. The mission is also a guide for the organization's structure, designed to minimize the inflexibility of its headquarters and the parochialism of its business units.

An authentic mission isn't a bronze plaque in the office lobby; it's an internal document. There's no harm if suppliers and customers see it. But its message is for the people who come in to work every day. Typically, lobby plaques proclaim an organization's good intentions, the values by which it wishes to live. But an authentic mission is drafted by top management, using information from teams throughout the organization that have engaged in guided introspections in order to identify hidden, positive root values that the organization does live by. These "keel of boat" values exist beneath the surface. Yet, they set a company's course. When an authentic mission captures these values, it

captures a company's soul. From there, it's just a short sail to core competencies and a purpose.

Cases in point

You may ask: What is the difference between a vision and a mission? It's easy to confuse the two, as a client (the CEO of a building materials company) did, saying that his company's style and markets demanded that it be opportunistic. "We're used to running a 50-yard dash while pulling on our shorts," he says. "A mission would lock us in." He's dead right about the need for opportunism in the current business climate. But he's wrong about a mission locking in the company. A bright future flows from the kind of actions taken in the present. His company would be more successful if being on its toes was a core competency and keel-of-boat value in the mission statement. When people hear good, previously unexpressed words that ring true, they say with recognition and pride, "Sure enough, that's the way we do things around here." That's tapping into organizational soul.

Whether for a parent company or a business unit, a mission should be a brief but compelling statement of

purpose, uniqueness, and method—in 75 crisp words or less. And most critical is that the first sentence be short, inspiring, and memorable. Next, the mission should answer these questions:

- ▶ What are our customers' needs?
- ▶ What are our products or services?
- ▶ How do we provide these products or services?

In the answers, an organization's uniqueness or competitive advantage is found. As General Electric CEO Jack Welch says, "If you don't have competitive advantage, don't compete."

Northwest Airlines provides an instructive example. Struggling for survival in a challenging industry, the company has gone from being

"Northworst" in many customers' minds to the number one on-time major carrier for the past three years. It also returned to profitability and went public, with its share price rising. And KLM expressed confidence by buying 25 percent, the maximum investment allowed for a foreign partner in a domestic U.S. airline.

Northwest's marketing-and-sales department drew its inspiration from a mission that began, "To build together...." The department realized that as a service business, its key marketers were employees, even though they had a reputation for being strongly prounion and adversarial with management. To complement television and radio ads, the marketing-and-sales department pushed off its own mission, "Customer loyalty keeps us flying." It galvanized workers into seeing what was in it for them. Now, Northwest employees own 30 percent of the company.

Mutare, a small software company, began its mission statement, "Caring and daring when it comes to improving customer communications, we're not afraid to break the rules." The mission statement of Spectrum Group, an information-technology consulting firm, starts, "We craft value through joint discovery." The mission of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian church leads off with, "We are a light in the city, reflecting the inclusive love of God."

In another example, David Schoenholz, senior vice-president and controller of Household International, wanted his department to know they had more business acumen than bean counting. Their mission statement begins, "We add value, not just numbers."

Such words don't merely echo through lobbies; they touch people at deep levels and resonate across the company. They don't make things happen; they let them happen. ■

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