

“Answering the Why?”

By Alan Brew

There’s a popular story in business circles about a small boy at Disneyland. He’s enjoying an ice cream cone when he accidentally drops it. A Disney “cast member” sees what happens and immediately cleans up the mess. He then gives the boy another ice cream and happiness is duly restored at the Magic Kingdom.

This simple story may be apocryphal; nonetheless, the fact that it is told and retold as a story of organizational transformation gives it great power. It captures both the spirit of Disneyland and the degree to which one employee can transform a small moment of disappointment to help deliver on a bigger idea.

Our economy is based on ideas. People not only want to know the “what”, but the “why”—why should I care? Answering the “why” is an organization’s cause. It provides reason for action, just like the employee at Disneyland who took the action he did because he saw his job as more than just a function. He was part of Disney’s cause of providing happiness.

The world’s great corporations—Disney, Lexus, Google and others—are more than just successful businesses: each of them has, at its core, an inspiring ideology that is intrinsically linked to an individual’s personal values and motivation.

Anita Roddick, founder of the phenomenally successful Body Shop, was a great exemplar of a cause in business. She was a pioneer of the whole concept of ethical and green consumerism long before it was fashionable. She believed that businesses could be run ethically, with what she called “moral leadership,” and still turn a profit. As one of Britain’s most visible business executives, she also worked on behalf of numerous causes—the rain forest, debt relief for developing countries, indigenous farmers in impoverished nations, whales, voting rights, anti-sexism and anti-ageism, to name a few. “We took our hearts to work everyday,” she said shortly before she died. In doing so she drew millions of people to her cause by bringing sustainable products to a mass market.

Given the issues we face in society today, having a cause in business, or any organization for that matter, is more important than ever before. If, for example, you want to recruit and retain the best and the brightest, it is not enough for a company to communicate “where” it is headed. It must also provide people with a compelling reason for getting there.

Many executives, try as they might, find it hard to shift their attention away from today’s stock price and quarterly results. The growing presence of private-equity investors on corporate share registers and the increasingly short tenure of CEOs have only intensified the obsession with short-term performance.

James Collins and Jerry Porras, authors of the seminal business book Built to Last, observed the presence of “core ideology” in visionary companies. Their research revealed that “authenticity of the ideology and the extent to which a company attains consistent alignment with the ideology counts more than the content of the ideology.” In other words, a coherent and authentic unifying idea that transcends the profit motive and serves as a touchstone in all organizational decision making is the vital ingredient in the most effective corporate cultures.



From Vision to Cause

In order to benefit from this insight, leaders first need to stop confusing ideology with vision. While vision tells people what needs to be done, it doesn't necessarily give them a motivation to do it. For a start-up, survival or even the very act of building a company against odds is cause enough. However, that may not be sufficient motivation for an employee as a company grows larger. When CEOs successfully discover an authentic corporate cause and make it an operational focus, employees behave more like partners than foot soldiers.

Causes cannot be manufactured and communicated by e-mail. They need to be discerned from within the organization and then emphasized. Managers should know what their employees care about when they leave work each day and think about how such interests relate to the company's business model.

The test for a cause-driven mission/vision statement is fairly straightforward—people can identify with a cause-driven vision statement, and it very often has a social benefit/welfare characteristic. People more often than not want an opportunity to contribute positively to society.

Some examples of cause-driven vision include:

Ford's goal of "democratizing the automobile." This was both a vision and a very worthy cause. No wonder Ford was a run-away success and an icon of a company during that time.

Sony: "Become the company most known for changing the world-wide poor quality image of Japanese products." Sony had a cause-driven vision and became a worldwide icon.

Mary Kay Cosmetics: "To give unlimited opportunity to women." Mary Kay Cosmetics was started by Mary Kay Ash in 1963, when she was more than 45 years old, with the simple goal of making a difference in women's lives. The company went on to become a multi-billion-dollar cosmetics powerhouse with almost a million sales consultants (almost all women) around the globe.

A striking example of a transformational cause in action was provided recently by the Regence Group, a not-for-profit organization and the largest affiliation of health care plans in the Pacific Northwest/Mountain region. Writing in *Strategy+Business* magazine, Mohan Nair, Chief Marketing Officer, describes how they discovered a cause in the desire of the organization to enhance, rather than impede, their members' health care experience, to get them involved in the process, while removing the "tyranny that exists in the health-care system." Too often, he says, health care professionals take a paternalistic approach to patients, dictating what they should do—both in terms of treatment and payment—while remaining opaque as to why.

"We found a deep, embedded desire at every level of our organization to make the system more transparent and empower our members' participation in their own health. We allowed this cause to breathe life into the company, energizing our employees and reconnecting with our corporate history, and indeed with the origins of the insurance industry: tight-knit American communities pooling their resources to take care of one another."

The realignment of the organization around the cause of a participatory model of health care provision reinvigorated the business. "This ideological framework had already existed, unseen, throughout the



company, and by aligning our operations with it, we unlocked value,” writes Nair. “Our business focus rapidly expanded to give members a voice in the process and help them get the most out of health care.”

Enabling points of access includes everything from Web-based technology that allows customers to interact with one another and with us, to phone-based customer service that is less about providing the status of a claim and more about true consultation, giving members as much information as possible to make their own choices and decisions.

A cause, then, is about passion. It stems from the heart; it can draw on a monumental amount of strength from the depths of a person’s being. Cause is what ignites and sustains the enterprise. You can buy time and skills—but you can’t buy commitment. Find your cause, and you have found your enduring and sustainable point of difference.