

Got Purpose?

A popular advertising campaign has celebrities and athletes smiling into the camera with a wide, white moustache on their upper lips with the headline, “Got milk?” The same question can be asked of corporate purpose. But what is it, and why is clarifying your corporate purpose so vital?

What Is It?

Corporate purpose is the compelling reason your organization exists. It need not be a world-changing reason. Most great organizational purposes are simple yet eloquent, powerful yet doable, profound yet basic. For example, the purpose for Rosenbluth International, the multi-billion dollar travel management company, is to always put employees first.

As a leader in pharmaceuticals, Merck’s purpose is summarized with “medicine is for people—not for profits.” The company is internationally renowned for donating millions of dollars of medicines to people around the world simply to help the patient’s condition, not to generate more bottom-line dollars.

How do values, mission and vision align with purpose? Values are the social principles, goals, or standards upon which



you base your entire operation. These are the things your organization stands for and desires to be known for by employees, customers, vendors and all associated with your enterprise. Mission is a statement that describes the nature of your business, your core products, services and core customers. It serves as a guidebook for how your operation works and for whom. Vision represents what you believe the future should be for your company. It is your summary of your future destination, be it market position, image, financial status, reputation, service, etc.

Purpose transcends values, mission and vision. A clear purpose forces employees, shareholders, vendors and even customers to look beyond the quarterly returns and measure the performance of the organization on more than short-term financial benchmarks. It pushes all involved to ask a critically important question: are we merely making money, or are we making a difference?

Three Elements of Purpose

There are three elements of purpose—transformation, acceleration and passion. Here’s a review of each.

Transformation: By definition, transformation suggests to change the condition, nature, or function of something, to modify the very form or appearance toward a new and better end. For example, “To honor God” or “Leave no one

behind” both include a sense of taking the current situation (however good or bad) and making it better. Organizational transformation occurs as leaders set in motion the resources, talent and energy necessary to move their company toward a greater place—a new level of competitive advantage, service delivery, products or process.

Transformational leaders who achieve great results instigate change, driving the changes necessary to aggressively move the organization toward its ultimate purpose. They are not satisfied with merely managing change, but rather transforming their current circumstances into a more significant tomorrow.

Ask yourself:

What conditions would I most like to change with my current and future customers?

Where exactly could we make the most difference in our community, our region or even the world?

What significant changes would I be willing to embrace within our company that would better position us for a future of great results?

Acceleration: Implies a sense of increased speed toward a specific end. Consider your drive into work today. When you enter your vehicle, you already know your destination. You start the engine, and probably drive slowly through your subdivision or sides streets before you merge into bigger streets and more traffic. At times you simply go with the flow. Yet you look for the right time to make your move...to switch lanes...to find an opening to move to the front of the pack. What allows you to make your way to the front? You push the accelerator!

A purpose statement is your company’s accelerator. Properly constructed, it gives all concerned a specific end that mandates continued improvement, increasing speed and a need for ever-changing strategies.



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Ask yourself:

Where are our pockets of greatest energy and inertia?

Are they headed toward a specific and acceptable result?

What is it about these areas that produce such acceleration?

How can we transfer their sense of speed into other operations?

Passion: Great purpose describes the heart of your organization. It engages the soul, touches the spirit and inspires those associated with the journey toward achieving it. Without a passion for purpose, employees are merely showing up for work and trying not to get into trouble. Without a passion for purpose, your customers only care about low prices. Without a passion for purpose, your shareholders are consumed with profits over principles. Without a passion for purpose, your enterprise loses the very humanness it was designed to serve.

Achieving great results in business mandates you have a clear, specific sense of how your company impacts the lives, dreams and desires of those you serve, both internally and externally. A well-crafted purpose helps you unleash the limitless passion of all those involved to achieve excellence.

Ask yourself:

What gets us excited about what we do?

Where is the heart of our company?

How can we better unleash the spirit of all those we touch?

The ROI

Understanding and solidifying your corporate purpose brings tremendous return on your investment in three ways.

First, purpose brings focus. It eliminates things that get in the way of success, that divert well-meaning employees from achieving results.

Second, purpose simplifies. Simple does not mean simplistic. Simple denotes that great purpose helps everyone in the organization avoid esoteric jargon and cut through bureaucracy.

Third, purpose clarifies. It helps everyone better understand their role in how to achieve overall goals. A great purpose guides employees in how to better align and invest existing resources, people and time around those things that drive the purpose rather than waste them on irrelevant or counter-productive activities.

With a focused, simple and clear purpose ingrained with passion, transformation, and acceleration, achieving great results within an organization is very likely. Without a focused, simple, clear purpose engrained with passion, transformation and acceleration, achieving great results in improbable if not impossible.