

Takers, Inventors, & Helpers

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Why are businesses formed? Why do we come and work together rather than staying home by ourselves to work? What is the basic reason our business exists? What is the basic thing we are trying to accomplish by working together?

The answer to this set of questions is our “mission,” our “purpose,” our “vision.”

Taking Money for Me

Probably the first, most common answer to the questions “why does this business exist?” and “why am I working here?” has to do with making money, earning a living, paying off my debts, buying a house, etc.. A business is different from a charity. Businesses are “for profit” enterprises.

For a lot of us, of course, making money is not just about “Me”---but about my family. Part of it is also about making enough money to be able to support some of those charities. Nothing wrong with supporting yourself anyway; that’s much better than being a costly burden on the state or on your family.

Money can be a great motivator to hard work, good business, and good lives. Good compensation systems reward quality work (not just “showing up”). So far, so good.

The problems arise when money becomes the only thing we (or our company) care about, when we will do almost anything to get it, get more of it, and get it just for ourselves. When we get addicted and obsessed with money we call it greed. Healthy ambition turns into unhealthy greed. It’s sometimes hard to see when we actually cross the line from ambition to greed (just like other addictions, e.g., to alcohol, we often think we are in control long after it has taken control of us). Usually other people can see it better than we can.

The problem with making money and financial gain the only, dominating passion and mission of a company or leader is that we can begin to cut ethical corners and step on people who get in our way. Some thefts are perpetrated by drug addicts desperate to fund their next hit. Other thefts are perpetrated by money addicts desperate to fund their next bonus. The addiction overwhelms all other values.

If money and profit are the only mission and vision at a company, be prepared for some unpleasant values and behavior to emerge. Profit (by itself) doesn’t leverage great character and behavior in people.

Invent Something

Great companies and great individuals are often driven by a passion to create or invent some thing or some service that is useful and beautiful. It is embedded in our human nature to be builders and inventors. We feel a great sense of satisfaction when we take on a task and complete it, especially if we can have a part in shaping that product or service to make it better.

Birds build nests, beavers build dams, but people are the true “builders” in nature. We see a space and imagine what we could build there. We see a challenge and opportunity and love to use our minds and hands to meet it.

Our homeless, down-and-out, neighbors on skid row often need a handout to help them survive. But even more they need a job where they can do something productive, take on some responsibility and some project---and by so doing recover their dignity and humanity. Creating jobs is much more important than creating soup kitchens in the broad scheme of things.

The business lesson is simple: focus the mission and vision of your company on some aspect of coming together to *invent and build something great*. Give your employees the freedom and the challenge to be creative and innovative. Your employees will likely respond to this emphasis (if it is truly authentic) by wanting to get out of bed in the morning and get to work. They will likely bring their best self to work, inspired by this creativity challenge.

Help Somebody

The second great mission/vision theme is the counterpart to the invent/build theme. Instead of “build something great” the theme is “help somebody hurting” or “fix something broken .” Here again, this is an instinct embedded in human nature. Normally, most of the time, we feel better about ourselves when we help somebody or fix something broken or messed up. By nature, people are helpers and fixers. We feel good when we solve a problem or fix something broken or clean up some mess.

We feel our dignity as human beings more when we help someone else—than when we are the needy victim being helped. Even poor, broken, weak, or very young people need opportunities to help others if their own personalities and self-images are to be strong.

And think of how people (most people) flock to help out when there is an accident, a big fire or earthquake or flood or mudslide. We dig deep and give to help out. We are herd animals, social creatures. Sometimes we fight and compete. But there is a part of every person that responds to the challenge to help somebody.

The business lesson is this: focus the mission and vision of your company on some aspect of helping others (or problem solving, repairing, or fixing something broken)---and watch your employees come to work with their best self, on their best behavior. It’s embedded in our nature.

Thieves and Beggars? or Inspired Workers?

The only “businesses” that can truly say “our mission is simply and exclusively to relieve you of your money” are thieves and beggars. Their mission is to transfer your money to themselves. Period.

But we can’t really make “relieving our clients and customers of their money” our mission. Our mission has to be to deliver a good product or helpful service to our customers---in light of which they will pay us some of their money. If we don’t concentrate on delivering that product or service well, the customer may choose to give their money to someone else.

Business leaders need to keep their eyes on the ball: stay mission-focused---and make sure that mission taps into the grand, foundational human characteristics of (1) “create/invent/build something good and useful” and (2) “help somebody, fix something.”