

A Star To Sail By

by Bill Hufford

Waves are twenty feet over your bow, dark clouds race your stern, winds rip at your sails, and your competitors – as well as the finish line – are out there *somewhere*... This isn't a yacht race we're talking about; it's business. Tall ships have crow's nests; modern ships have GPS, but as an entrepreneur there is only one thing to keep you on course in today's turbulent economy and ever-changing horizon... you must have *Vision!*

Vision is not just a neatly framed sentence on the wall; it is the brass gyroscope that keeps your business running true no matter what competitive, legal, or economic environment exists. With it, your ship sails smoothly in times of peace or in a storm; without it your ship will flounder even in the shallows.

In the book *Built to Last*, by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, they state that vision is made up of two component parts – **Core Ideology** and **Envisioned Future**. We will focus on the “Core Ideology” part of their definition, which is made of two parts as well – **Core Values** and **Core Purpose**.

Core Values

“Core Values are timeless guiding principles that require no external justification. Their significance comes from within the organization, not from outside.” The reputation your company projects will be a result of your Core Values. They are the “spirit” behind your strategy, not the strategy itself. For example, here are three core values of a local company: 1) *Listen First*, 2) *Succeed through Teamwork*, and 3) *Speak with Candor*. If properly engrained in the company alone, just these three values alone will put a unique spin on this company's operating practices. They act as both a guide and inspiration.

Collins and Porras point out that it is far more important to know *who* you are than where you are going, because who you are will determine *how* you get there. Core Values lift you up into the crow's nest to see over the crowd, to be goal-driven rather than succumb to the tyranny of the urgent.

At the end of the day, you want to be tangibly successful, but don't discount the *intangible* either. Consumer trust and personal integrity is every bit as important as financial success. To find your company's Core Values ask some hard questions: How do you want to be known? Conversely, how do you *not* want to be known? What intangible qualities do you admire in others? Thinking of your last truly satisfying business transaction with another company, what values did they display that you benefited from? Ask these and similar questions to unearth your own business values. Keep the list short, between five and nine values.

Core Purpose

Core Values represent the “who” of your company; **Core Purpose** represents the “why.” What is your company's fundamental reason for being? Don't confuse

this with your products and services. What you produce for your clients is more than just meeting a physical want or need. It's more than what they walk out with. If that's all you provide, then your client could easily go to a lower-priced competitor. Your purpose is to provide an overall positive experience for the customer in meeting their emotional needs as well. A local bank's Core Purpose is to "*help people and institutions prosper.*" It isn't to offer their clients financial tools and free checking, it's to help them *prosper*. By combining their products and services with their Core Values it creates an emotional experience for their client that keeps that client coming back.

Core Purpose is harder to define than Core Values and it is even more important for guiding and inspiring a company. An effective purpose reflects the importance people attach to the company's work. It captures the "soul" of the company.

To extract your Core Purpose, ask yourself, "What intangible experience do I offer my clients?" "What can I be passionate about providing my customers?" "What is the felt need of my consumers?" If you get stumped, look at your products and services and try to discern the overarching emotional impact they can have on someone's life.

Collins and Porras summed up the importance of Core Ideology by stating:

"With an increasingly mobile society, cynicism about corporate life, and an expanding entrepreneurial segment of the economy, companies need more than ever to have a clear understanding of their purpose in order to make work meaningful and thereby attract, retain, and motivate outstanding people."

A final caution: Core Values and Core Purpose must come from within you; they cannot be fulfilled if you don't believe in them. Take some time with these questions. Core Ideology doesn't change; it inspires change. When you find yourself in the midst of a business storm, you may have to change your strategy to navigate the storm, but you shouldn't change who you are as a business. It may be a lot harder to deliver under difficult circumstances but well-developed and adopted values and purpose will keep you on course to delivery high quality goods and services to your clients.