

How Causes Can Animate Companies

by Mohan Nair

08/28/2007

a strategy+business exclusive

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Moving beyond the mission statement to find true motivation.

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The world's greatest corporations — Apple, Disney, Google, and others — are more than just profitable enterprises and stellar brands: They inspire enthusiasm in consumers and dedication in employees. What sets these companies apart? They are anchored on more than just a revenue-creating business model. Each of them has, at its core, an inspiring ideology that is intrinsically linked to the company's value proposition and competency.

James Collins and Jerry Porras, authors of *Built to Last*, have also observed the presence of “core ideology” in visionary companies. Their research indicates 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. Many CEOs sense this intuitively, but the best leaders have mastered tools and techniques to capture that energy methodically.

From Mission to Cause

In order to benefit from this insight, leaders first need to stop confusing ideology with mission. Most companies

are ostensibly organized around a mission; they hang their *raison d'être* on a mission statement. By definition, however, ideologies are causes, and missions are directives that flow from those causes.

The best companies are animated by a cause. A cause is a lasting theme, an architecture that supports the transformation of the greater environment. It has personal, rather than organizational, implications. Missions are given to groups walking in lockstep; causes are taken up by creative individuals. A mission is a bounded, purposeful action. Missions impose the will of managers on employees, whereas causes are grounded in the latent, unexpressed will of the overall organization, and usually resonate with the company's identity or history.

When CEOs successfully discover an authentic corporate cause and make it an operational focus, employees behave more like partners than foot soldiers. But crucially, unlike missions, causes cannot be fabricated — they cannot be sent out in a memo. They need to be discerned 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 value proposition. Causes lie in the intersection between these areas.

At the Regence Group, where I work, we discovered a cause in the desire of our organization, a health

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and life insurer, to enhance, rather than impede, our members' health-care experience; to get them involved in the process, while removing the tyranny that exists in the health-care system. Too often, 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. We fundamentally reoriented our value proposition toward that concept and adjusted our competencies accordingly. It reinvigorated our business.

This ideological framework had already existed, unseen, throughout the company, and by aligning our operations with it, we unlocked value. Our business focus rapidly expanded to give members a voice in the process and help them get the most out of health care. The competencies around that goal are critical. They include 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. To date, our approach has captured the imagination of our members, as evidenced by 69 percent return participation on www.myregence.com, a portal of choice for member engagement. Many of our members use the

site to converse and assist one another on topics such as parenting, cancer, pregnancy, and weight management.

Putting It into Operation

It is challenging to implement “conceptual” change in a way that is rigorous and measurable. Everyone encounters companies with terrific slogans that employees don't actually implement, because they aren't sold on the ideas. But becoming a company with an authentic cause is a more concrete process than one might imagine.

First, remember that you are not trying to change employees' perspectives; you are not encouraging them to see their old work in a new light. Rather, you are trying to change the way the entire organization approaches its work to align the company's value proposition with its cause. This requires leading by example. As Gandhi said, “Be the change you want to see.”

Second, cause, and the values and competencies aligned with it, should be assessed and measured like any other organizational change program. At Regence, we developed six core initiatives related to our cause and implemented a balanced scorecard approach to set targets against those initiatives and measure our success. Although the exact nature of the initiatives is proprietary, they are measured using the four classic balanced scorecard frame of reference — customer, internal process, and learning and growth — but with a twist. One of the challenges of the balanced scorecard is that although it can give a good sense of the cause and effect of actions at various levels, it can be difficult to translate these findings into objectives. By setting measurable objectives that explicitly track the initiatives' progress, we were able to achieve greater functionality and reach. We also brought training and development into the

process and appointed two motivated leaders to head up the transformation. Our board of directors and our 6,600 employees understand and work within the scorecard, at both the corporate level and the departmental level, with clearly defined objectives.

As a result, we've seen a definite increase in employee engagement; senior management met with each of the employees during the initial phase of this process, in 2004, and have continued to measure engagement through surveys and one-on-one interviews. We learned that to engage others in health care, we had to first engage ourselves and become examples.

Ultimately, the power of alignment in cause, value, and competencies lies within individual employees and their ability to express themselves with common purpose in their work. People will lend you their capabilities if you pay them; they might lend you their imagination if you put them in charge of a cause. +

Resources

Jim Collins and Jerry I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (HarperBusiness, 1994): Collins and Porras examine the importance of having an organizational ideology and aligning actions with that ideology. <http://amazon.com/dp/0060566108/>

Bill George, "The Company's Mission Is the Message," *s+b*, Winter 2003: George, the author of *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets to Creating Lasting Value* and the former chairman and CEO of the U.S. medical technology firm Medtronic Inc., posits that mission-driven companies accrue more shareholder value than do financially-driven firms. <http://strategy-business.com/article/849025>

"Google, Innovation, and the Web," *FC Now* (Fast Company Weblog), March 2004: This blog entry contains an excerpt from a speech by Marissa Mayer, director of consumer Web products at Google, outlining how various practices and initiatives within the company support its stated mission to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." http://blog.fastcompany.com/archives/2004/03/14/google_innovation_and_the_web.html

Mohan Nair, *Essentials of Balanced Scorecard* (Wiley & Sons, 2004): This book from this article's author provides an overview of balanced scorecard strategies by defining performance objectives, measures, and targets from four perspectives: financial, customer, internal process, and learning and growth. <http://amazon.com/dp/0471569739/>

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is published by Booz Allen Hamilton.
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