



Sharpen Your Focus

To channel your energies, figure out what business you are really in

Tim Stevenson

IN THE 1970s a large film studio in Hollywood was failing. They tried harder. They produced big-budget movies backed by expensive advertising. They spent money like crazy. But nothing seemed to work. The studio continued to lose money.

Finally, they called in a consultant. He said, "I'd like you to give me the freedom to poke around, talk to people, and ask questions. Give me some time."

After several days, the consultant returned. "I found out what your problem is," he said. The executives were all ears.

"You have a lot going for you here: talented people, hard-working staff, great facilities. As far

as I can tell, you have everything you need to be successful, except for one thing.

"Excellence in work follows sharpness of purpose."

"I talked with all kinds of people over these days. I talked with executives, directors, actors, sound technicians, set builders, secretaries, and accountants. There was one question I asked everyone I spoke with in the course of our conversation. I asked them, 'What business are you in here?'

"What business are you in here?"

"And wherever I went, whoever I talked to, they basically gave me the same answer: 'We're in the movie-making business.'

"*There's* your problem. You see, if you're in the movie-making business, when are you



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successful? When you *make movies*. It doesn't matter if they make money or lose money. It doesn't matter if people like them or hate them. If you're in the 'movie-making business,' you are successful if you simply make movies.

"May I suggest," the consultant went on, "that you change that answer. I suggest you define yourself as in the business of *marketing entertainment*. Think about it. If you're in the business of marketing entertainment, when are you successful? When people are entertained. And you can be pretty sure that if people find your movies entertaining, they will pay to see them, and tell their friends about it."

The studio got the message, changed their mindset of "what business they were in," and turned around their fortunes.

That sharpened purpose also expanded their creativity. They thought, "If we're in the business of marketing entertainment, we could do other things than making movies." They expanded into marketing soundtracks of their movies, memorabilia and collectibles, and the new vehicle of videos for home viewing.

How do you spell "success"?

I came across the story of the consultant and movie studio so many years ago that I can't remember which studio it was or the source, but the lesson of the story stuck with me permanently. It's all about asking the question, "**What business are we in?**" Why? Because the way you answer this question will determine how you **think** and everything you **do** on the job. It provides a compass point guiding your strategies and decision-making.

In 1977 Debbi Fields, a young mother with a few recipes but no business experience, opened her first cookie store. It grew over the next decades into a company with franchises around the world. How can you build an empire on cookies? What business is she in? This is Debbi Fields's answer:

I've never felt like I was in the cookie business. I've always been in a feel-good feeling business. My job is to sell joy. My job is to sell happiness. My job is to sell an experience.

Lots of people sell tasty cookies. But how much better if people walk away with a feel-good experience, along with some joy and happiness. You may think that's a reach, but it's definitely a clear vision for her company. You can be sure her employees are affected by a mission like that. They will have it in their bones that just selling a cookie is not enough. The question becomes, "How can I help this customer have a feel-good experience? How can I share some joy and happiness?" That leads to special customer service.

Here's another one I like. How exciting could a business be that sells rock, gravel, and asphalt? That's not exactly a thrill a minute. Graniterock Company of Watsonville, California says its purpose is "**To make people's lives better by improving the quality of man-made structures.**"

As a vision, "making people's lives better" beats "selling rock" by a long shot. Incidentally, Graniterock is a past winner of the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award and has been named one of America's 100 best places to work by *Fortune* magazine.

What about you?

Mission and Vision Statements can be trite, certainly. But where they are sharply focused and leaders take them seriously, they can be immensely powerful toward giving direction for a company's employees. Good ones serve as defining "what business we are in," a sharp statement of meaningful purpose.

I once spoke to a local gathering of small business owners and challenged them with this question, turning the meeting into a workshop. About two weeks later I ran into Tom, the

owner of a company that sells external lighting for residences. He said, “I’m going crazy! I still can’t figure out what business I’m in! I just sell lighting to people for their homes.”

I asked him, “Ok, Tom. You sell lights. But *why* do people want them? What does your lighting **do for people?**”

“Well,” he said. “They make people’s homes more attractive. They make them safer and more secure. And they make them more usable. People can enjoy their yards at night.”

“Then you have your answers right there,” I said. “Work with that and figure out how to say that concisely. It will become your mission.”

Even if your organization already has a defined mission, there’s more thinking and work to do. **What about your individual area of contribution? What about your department or office?** What business are **you** in? How do you want your team to answer the question?

The exercise

Any organization or subgroup of the same can do this exercise. The question you must answer is, “**What business are we in?**” Set aside unhurried time to hold this discussion with your team. Here are the steps.

1. **Explain the goal.** You want to define a sharp focus on “what business we are in.” Give examples of what that looks like, such as those shared in this article.
2. **Define who “we” is.** “We” might be “we four in this site.” It might be a specific type of work: IT ... training ... clinical practices

... operations ... finance ... customer service. You determine the right definition of who “we” is for this discussion.

3. After people begin sharing suggestions, peel the onion by repeatedly asking **Why?** *Why* do customers (external or internal) need your product or service? Keep asking “Why?” until you get down to a sharp purpose.

Keep in mind that people do not buy a product or service. They buy what that product or service *does for them*. You don’t buy toothpaste, for example. You buy an attractive smile. You don’t buy a gym membership. You buy looking good in a swimsuit at the beach.

So, considering your product or service: What does it *do* for the people who use it?

4. Once you’ve defined what business you’re in, it’s a matter of continuous communication to remind your people and striving to pursue it.

The “continuous” part of communicating is essential. You don’t build a healthy performance-based culture on a single 90-minute speech, no matter how brilliant or inspiring. You do it like the proverbial water torture: Drip, drip, drip, endlessly repeating and aligning behaviors to it.

Excellence in work follows sharpness of focus. Work must connect to a purpose and vision greater than ordinary activities to draw out people’s devotion and effort.

As a leader, you can help your team get there. **L**