

DEFINING YOUR “WHY” FOR A POST-COVID WORLD

Tips for using this time to better align your organization with purpose and passion in mind.



INTRODUCTION

Companies are scrambling to survive the greatest global challenge facing several generations. Some will make it. Others will not. Regardless of where each will be when we emerge post-pandemic, most leaders and employees alike are taking this time for self-reflection. They are searching within to find their “Why.” This public health crisis is as much an existential predicament as it is an economic one.

While businesses that rise from the ashes may look altogether different from 2019, those that will truly thrive will have taken this time to clearly define their Why and communicate it to employees, so all can be aligned. Ideally, this defining process should be one that leadership cycles through on a regular basis. After all, an organization’s Why isn’t static. It should change to reflect the business and its leadership as they grow and change and then be communicated to employees. But if you haven’t defined your Why lately, or consistently through the years, here are some tips for how you can do it now.

What is the Why?

According to Craig Stevenson, principal, business advisor, and CEO coach, “The Why defines what an organization is trying to achieve in a broader context long-term. It’s why they exist. It may not be concrete and specific. It may be more aspirational. But the Why is a means by which people and employees can coalesce around a direction and purpose.” That differs, he says, from the mission, values, and vision.

Amelya Stevenson, an executive coach, business owner, and Vistage Chair for CEOs and business leaders, agrees, “The Why is a clear purpose, but not the mission statement which is very structured. If you have a purposeful Why, you inspire leaders to achieve. That sense of purpose comes from the heart; it’s natural and easy to understand. The Why creates the inspiration, and the inspiration creates action. When others rally around it, it is the highest form of motivation.”





LET'S RETHINK

Why do you Need a Why?

“Without the Why, it’s difficult to define the mission and vision in a way that will bond employees,” Craig says. “When they know the Why, they have a much greater reason for coming to work. They can see how what they do ties to an aspirational goal. So, the Why provides the connectedness, both internally with what employees do day-in and day-out, but it also ties externally to customers.”

There can also be disconnects when an organization’s Why does not align with an employee’s. It may look and feel like it’s not a good fit for either party.

“Disconnect happens when peoples’ personal Whys are really different than the organization’s Whys,” Tracy Murphy, an architect of change, says. From the employee perspective, “you have to know your personal Why first. Otherwise, you won’t know if you fit into an organization, and you won’t recognize when it’s time to part ways.”

Such disconnect should not be viewed as a negative, she says. “It’s not bad for an employee to leave if they’re following a passion or doing it for the right reason.”

Conversely, it can be better for the organization if it results in better alignment, as Craig notes. “Why comes from being authentic with yourself in what really matters. It doesn’t focus on materialism; it focuses on other people and doing what’s right. The Why is your most effective means of creating a story. That story has to be personal. It has to resonate internally as well as externally. Within that story, people need to be able to see themselves. If they don’t, maybe the alignment isn’t as strong for them. But it will attract those who are more in sync. Everyone will have their own interpretation and will carry it forward in different ways, but the Why forms that common bond.”

Finding Your Why?

Since every organization and every person should have a Why, finding one is not a top-down exercise in management. Rather, it involves soul searching and thoughtful discussion.

For the employee, Tracy cites a few crucial questions to be answered, all of which are deeply personal (there are no wrong answers!):

- What does a good day look like?
- What does a bad day look like?
- What do you love about your work?
- What do you hate?
- Who do you love to work with... and why?
- What can you do better than one million other people can do?



She also notes that people can do this exercise with hindsight if they are seeking a job change, by asking such questions as What job did I love? What job did I hate? What team drove me crazy? What motivates me?

At the organizational level, leaders can look to experts like Dean Bokhari, who outlines a similar but less personal list of questions in his book *How to Find Your Why and Communicate Your Purpose*.

- Our WHY is the purpose, the cause, or the belief that drives every organization and every person's individual career.
- WHY does your company exist?
- And WHY should anyone care?
- Your WHY is what sets you apart from everyone else. It's your purpose. It's what inspires you to take action. Your WHY is also what inspires others to take action, spread your ideas, or buy your products.

Craig notes it's a crucial mistake to skip this process, "If no one knows your Why, they'll create their own because they're being forced to guess and interpret. That causes inconsistency."





Make it Short and Sweet

Having a solid Why helps to create an organization's culture. It also creates a foundation for decisions to be made on a daily basis, says Craig. "If there's confusion and left to their own accord, they'll make their own decisions and run amok. So you need to be clear about what the story is and how you communicate it."

That story is tethered to leadership, and it is their fingerprints on the Why. Telling that story becomes a critical step.

"They have to get away from the structured statements and presentations. They need to talk about themselves as human beings. People may not remember anything about the facts of how the business was started, but they'll remember a heartfelt, passionate story about why it was started," Amelya explains.

Focusing on the human element is key, say all the experts. Then, find the right words that will resonate with everyone.

Amelya advises that when it is communicated to employees, it should be explained in just a few words. In a way that is quick and easy for employees to recite. Only then will they be able to internalize it fully.

The Time is Now

In light of this catalyst we call Covid, experts encourage leaders (and employees) to take advantage of this window for change.

When you're in change is the time to change,” explains Tracy. “If you have all of your basic needs met, and of course, that's hard for a lot of people right now. But if you have the freedom to be on solid footing, then you need to be taking advantage of the change you see around you, to tap into what you want to change for yourself.”

“It's critical for leaders during this time of confusion to be human, relatable, honest, and transparent. They should use this opportunity as a time to talk openly and honestly from their hearts about what scares them and what's meaningful to them; and how they see the employees helping them achieve success again and get back to caring for customers,” says Craig.

Before Covid, leaders may have had management styles that were more autocratic. But many are being forced to look at new ways to lead and communicate. Defining and sharing the Why can serve as a starting point for that new path forward.

As Amelya says, “All of the issues and challenges are real. Leaders need to address them from a different place, from their hearts, not just their heads. But now is the time to tap into passion, to be purposeful about who they are, and what their character is, and to somehow connect that with the belief that will inspire others. Now is a great time to think differently, take a risk and be bold.”

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