

Leading Without a Common Why

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You've heard it for years—a clear, compelling, and shared purpose is the driving force for building and sustaining a high-performing organization. It provides the “why” that serves as the North Star guiding every action and pulling people toward success.

You can't argue with the successes trotted out in the leadership literature. [Google](#) wants to organize the world's information without doing evil. [Apple](#) contributes to the world by making tools that advance humankind. [Southwest Airlines](#) connects people to what's important in their lives through friendly, reliable, low-cost travel. [Walmart](#) helps people save money so that they can live better.

The implication is that organizational nirvana awaits those who have the vision to see beyond profit and the courage to surround themselves with true believers. The leader's job is to instill and reinforce commitment to the mission, vision, values, and purpose.

TALKING TO PEOPLE WHO DO REAL WORK

Our garage door opener broke a few months ago, and we chose a company with a great long-term reputation to do the repair. You could easily see from their website that these folks were passionate about garage doors, integrity, and service.

During my conversation with the service technician, I learned that garage doors were not part of his long-term future. He took the job because he needed steady hours to support his family while his spouse completed her college degree. At some point, he intended to complete his education.

Make no mistake - the technician did a great job and embodied the company values of service and integrity. He went above and beyond expectations to help me program the new openers to my automobiles. He just didn't share his company's passion for garage doors.

There is a seldom acknowledged reality about the importance of buy-in to your purpose: People do things for their reasons not yours.

It is great if everyone working with you believes in the cause in which you believe, and you should absolutely hire people who fit that profile if you can.

There is a good chance, however, that some of the people on your team aren't really motivated by your organization's “why.” They are there for the benefits, the hours, the pay, or the flexibility. Others choose to work for you because the job is close to home, accessible by public transit, or is a desirable temporary stop on a longer journey.

TOOLS FOR ENGAGING OTHERS

People who are not true believers in your purpose can still be valuable team members if you use the following strategies to engage them.

Understand and acknowledge their Why: A clear purpose is a powerful motivator even if it isn't the same as yours. Show interest in the hopes and aspirations of those you lead. Stay on the lookout for developmental opportunities to help them grow and achieve their goal. Be honest about what you can and can't do to help them succeed. Most important, don't make others feel like second class citizens simply because they don't share your or the company's purpose.

Ensure they understand the organization's Why: Team members must still know and perform to help the organization achieve its purpose even if they don't completely share it. Continue to educate and reinforce your vision, values, and purpose. Show individuals how they contribute, and make them feel a part of the team. Create an environment that allows them to do their best work. Just don't be disappointed if they don't sign up for the free company tattoo at this year's holiday party.

Ensure alignment on the How: Training on how to do the job is a given, right? The "how" in this case deals with the organization's values regarding treatment of colleagues, customers, and company resources. Alignment on how the organization operates is more crucial than a common sense of purpose in creating a culture of trust, accountability, and excellence.

The philosopher Nietzsche said, "He who has a why can endure any how." There is no doubt that a compelling common purpose is a valuable tool in building a high-performing organization. If you have that level of buy-in, don't squander it. If you don't, there are other ways to succeed.

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