

A Sense of Mission

Book Summary

Leaders have a vision and a sense of mission that lifts up and inspires men and women to help achieve that mission. In fact, there is in every one of us a desire to commit to something bigger than ourselves; leaders can tap into that root of motivation, drive, and enthusiasm that allows us to commit ourselves to achieving that vision.

As a leader, then, you must have a goal that excites and inspires. And the only goals that excite and inspire are goals that are qualitative. Nobody gets excited or inspired about raising the share price or making more money or getting a raise. But we do get inspired and excited about bringing a product or service to people who need it, and about being the best, and about winning great success in a competitive field.

Strive to Be the Best

As a leader, the most important vision you can have for yourself is to be the best. And that same vision must apply to your business or your organization. You will accept nothing less for yourself or your company than to be the best at what you do. In business, that means asking:

What quality about your product or service is most relevant or important to your customers?

Once you've identified that quality, focus all the energies and creativity of your employees and managers on achieving superior performance in that area.

We need to be the best. You won't feel great or as good as you could feel, or capable of extraordinary performance, unless you are aligned with the best people in your field and doing the very best job that people are capable of.

Instill Meaning and Purpose

Being dedicated to a mission gives work meaning and purpose. As human beings, we need meaning and purpose as much as we need food and water and air. We need a sense of significance. And leaders are those people who make us feel significant. They make us feel important and remind us that what we are doing has value far beyond just the day-to-day work. They make us feel that we are an integral part of the mission team

There are four ways to make people feel important, and they each start with the letter A. First is *appreciation*. Take every opportunity to thank people for the quality of their work and their role in making the company a success. Every time you thank individuals, they are going to feel more valuable and will be more motivated to justify your faith in them

The second way to make people feel more important and valuable is by showing *approval*. Praise people at every opportunity, for any accomplishment, large or small. Praise them also for their suggestions and insight — for their thinking. People will take praise emotionally. Their self-esteem and self-worth rise. But it's important to praise immediately and specifically, so that people know that it is genuine.

The third way you can build a sense of importance and value in a person is through *admiration*. Continually compliment people, whether it's on their traits, such as persistence, on their possessions, such as clothes, or on their accomplishments.

Perhaps the most important way for people to feel important and valued is through *attention*. People aren't going to be dedicated to the goals of the organization if they are continuously ignored. They are not going to feel like key players in the mission if they just receive commands without having any opportunity for input or feedback. Attention means listening to people, without interrupting. You don't necessarily have to take their suggestions or agree to what they are saying. But give them a chance to say it.

A Common Cause

A good goal or a good mission gives a clear sense of direction not only to the organization, but to every person in the organization.

A good goal unifies everyone in a common cause. For example, IBM is one of the great industrial leaders of business history. One of its goals is to give the very best customer service of any company in the entire world. One of its missions is to be known as the company that cares for its customers. This mission, which involves a qualitative not a quantitative goal, excites and inspires people throughout the company because they think about it and talk about it all the time. They believe they're the best and that nobody takes care of customers like they do at IBM. Everyone in the company knows that his job, one way or another, is related to taking care of customers, and this knowledge unifies everybody in a common cause.

The mission of a company will often be encapsulated in a mission statement. A mission statement is a clear statement of why the company exists in the first place and what its overarching goal or purpose is. Mission statements usually involve the customer in some way—for example, how your product or service is going to help make the customer's life better. YouTube founder Chad Hurley wanted people to be able to send homemade videos over the Internet. Charles Schwab's mission was to be the “most useful and ethical financial services company.” Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin wanted to make navigating the Internet easier.

Why does your company exist? What is its cause?

The Core Purpose of Every Business

For a business leader, there is one core purpose above all, and that is to acquire and serve a customer. Leaders make the customer of the organization the central focus. Take the example of Nordstrom, whose leaders think incessantly and continuously about their customers. IBM thinks and talks about only its customers. More and more companies are becoming obsessed with the customer. You see, once everybody agrees on who the customer is and agrees that the purpose of the company is to satisfy that customer the very best way possible, then it's easy to get everybody pulling together.

As a matter of fact, I believe that you can tell how well led an organization is by applying a very simple test. When you're in that organization, look at and listen to how people refer to the customer. In a good organization, the customers are always referred to with respect. They are always referred to with pride, as though they are important. When a customer calls, it is an important occasion. And when a customer has a problem and is helped, it is a cause for celebration. When a customer calls and is happy or satisfied with a product or service, everybody takes on a tremendous feeling of pride and accomplishment.

In your organization, how do people talk about the customer?

Let's say you run a department that services another department within the organization. That other department is your customer. Whoever must use what you produce in your area of responsibility is your customer. And leaders must be very much focused on satisfying that customer.

If you are going to be a business leader or a leader of a department or any organization, you must sit down and think through what the mission or the overarching purpose or goal is going to be for that business or department. It is the determination of a mission to be the best, that does something to help others, that is the starting point of your ascension and rise to the top of leadership.