

SECRETLY NOW, do you cringe when you hear people talk about missions, visions and values? Do you feel like the business world got lost in the semantic twilight zone years ago? Ever seen a company spend tons of time, energy and money trying to navigate the mumbo-jumbo of strategy development while the obvious was neglected?

I've felt it and I've seen it so I know just how you feel. Somehow, the entire process of developing a strategy, which is a completely natural process to many, has been derailed and obfuscated. There is more focus on the quality of the vision statement than the value of the vision it is meant to express. Your mission statement may be in limbo because it is said to be missing a critical required component even though your personal sense of mission may be strong and clear as can be. Books and speakers seem to differentiate themselves by promoting yet another set of definitions and process handcuffs. Bright people are silenced by their embarrassment at having to ask repeatedly for clarification.

Why all this attention on definitions, perfectly crafted statements, and aesthetically framed proclamations, rather than a clear sense of direction?

I can't answer that question, but what I'd like to do is provide a simple example to show you just how natural is the process of developing a mission, vision, values, and strategy. I'm not saying that a good strategy is easy to come by. I am saying that one is much harder to come by if you focus so much energy on the process as opposed to the purpose.

All Natural Ingredients

Let's start with a familiar itch: "The grass is greener on the other side of the fence. I wish we were over there."

"Why?"

"Because if the grass is so green, think of the vegetables we could grow! I want to be the Pioneer Valley's answer to the Jolly Green Giant, but without the steroids!" (Our Vision!)

"But wait a minute, is that all we care about? Growing vegetables?"

"Yes, we want to grow wonderful vegetables so people far and wide can eat well and be healthy." (Our Mission!)

"But why do we have to move?"

"Because this yard is small, the soil poor, and the shade heavy."

"OK. But if we are going to move, maybe the yard next door is not the best choice. What should we look for? What kinds of vegetables should we grow?"

Mission, Vision... Poppycock!



Ann Latham

continued on page 12

Mission: *cont. from page 7*

How much land do we need? How will we pay for it? How much money can we make? Will we have to borrow money? Will we need to hire people? Are there enough good workers near by? I don't know how to hire people! What else will we need to learn? We need to answer a zillion questions. What will our business really look like?" (We need a Strategy!)

*Strategy is
harder to come by
if you focus so much on
the process as opposed
to the purpose.*

"Now that you mentioned hiring, I want to be sure all of our employees understand that providing excellent, fresh, organic produce that can compete in the marketplace with 'inorganic' (?) produce requires teamwork, attention to detail, innovation and honesty." (Our Values!)

"Once we have answers to all of those questions, we'll have to get busy and find the right land, learn lots, buy some equipment, and do a ton of other things before we can even think about planting new vegetables." (Implement the Strategy)

"In the meantime, I guess we better keep our little garden going and bring what we can to the farmer's market as usual." (Split our attention between managing operations and implementing our strategy.)

So When Did Things Get So Complicated?

Wouldn't you agree this example represents a pretty natural process? A vision was born, a mission clarified, a strategy begun, and values identified without ever using any of those distracting words.

It is not always easy to ask all the right questions. Nor are the answers going to be obvious. However, the process need not be complicated. Energy wasted on semantics and the process itself reduce the energy available for asking the right questions and finding the best answers.

Keep it simple:

- "Remind me again, what make this business important to us?" (mission)

- "Given the market, the competition, and all the other external factors, what niche will allow our business to survive and thrive?" (strategic direction)

- "If we dream a little, how cool could it be?" (vision)

- "Yikes! Very cool! But what would this business have to look like to do that? What products and services, what processes, what knowledge, what skill, what infrastructure, and what kind of investment would make that possible?" (strategic framework)

- "What attitudes must we nurture if we are to succeed?" (values)

More than ever, this fast-paced, topsy-turvy world demands great vision, strong commitment to your mission, intentional support of values, and a quick, flexible approach to strategizing so that you can stay ahead of the curve. And if you don't like the words, don't use them. Ask the right questions and find good answers. **RM**

Ann Latham is President of Uncommon Clarity, Inc., a firm that specializes in making people productive, processes reliable, and customers happy through strong strategies and smart systems. For more information, visit www.uncommonclarity.com or call 413-527-3737.

Reprinted with permission from the newsletter, Related Matters, of the UMass Amherst Family Business Center: An interactive, non-commercial learning environment that helps you Treat Your Business Like a Business and Your Family Like a Family.