

WHAT **GREAT** LEADERS

DO

7 Essentials for Enduring Impact

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Necessary Clarity

One benefit of never being the smartest person in the room is the constant pressure to reduce complex issues to their simplest form. So one morning, I jotted down those three questions on a three-by-five card and decided they would serve as my guide until otherwise notified. That was over forty years ago. So far, still good.

As we're about to discover, these three questions clarify *mission*, *inspiration*, and *execution*. But before we do a deep dive into each, how would you answer those three questions?

- What is your organization doing?
- Why is it doing what it's doing?
- How do you fit in? In other words, what is your primary value in light of your answer to the first question?

If you had to pause to think about it, you just tripped over the importance of this simple framework, as well as the challenges related to it. Something came to mind related to all three questions. I imagine that would be true for most of your associates as well. Generally speaking, your team knows what your company is doing, why it's doing it, and where they fit in, but *generally*, that rarely translates to *clarity*.

Yet imagine for a moment if everyone who reports to you could answer those first two questions immediately and identically. Imagine everyone who reports to folks who report to you being able to do the same. Imagine every associate downstream from you having an answer to the third question with equal clarity. Imagine everybody defining the win the same way and knowing with certainty whether their department, division, or unit is winning.

Question 1: What Are You Doing?

You do a lot of things. Your organization does a lot of things. But once upon a time, your organization was created to do one thing. Perhaps the one thing became many things over time or transitioned to something completely different. But the many things your organization currently does are connected to, support, facilitate, and accomplish one primary thing. What is that? What does your organization do? Why does it exist?

Clarity requires identifying the one thing expedited by the endless list of things. The list reflects complexity. Perhaps necessary complexity—complexity that serves as a means to an end.

What is *the* end?

Your employees know what *they're* doing. Hopefully. To put it grammatically incorrectly: They know what *me* is doing, but do they know what *we* is doing? *We* is what makes *me* critical and essential to the success of the organization. If I'm confused about *we*, eventually I'll lose sight of what the win is for *me*. If I don't know what *we* are doing, I won't have a compelling answer to the third question: *Where do I fit in?*

If you've ever tackled a five-hundred-piece or more jigsaw puzzle without the box top as a reference, you get the picture, because you didn't have the picture. Mixing metaphors, it's impossible for our people to know if they're winning if they don't have a picture against which to measure their efforts. When we don't provide individuals and teams with a box top, they conjure their own. They define success for themselves. Unclear correlation between organizational success and personal or departmental success leads to sideways energy and competing agendas, which undermine efficiency and execution.

Let's assume for a moment that the pieces of your organization are perfectly aligned to do what you've set out to do. The answer to this first question is a succinct description of what your perfectly aligned pieces are perfectly aligned to do. What are you doing?

The answer to this question is usually obvious to founders and their start-up team, so obvious that it goes without saying. It goes without specifying or wordsmithing. There's no urgency to hyper-define the win. It's self-evident. It's why they started the company. But what is so obvious it hardly needs stating becomes increasingly less obvious with every additional concentric circle of staffing. The more successful an organization becomes, the more critical it is to clarify the win.

Growth breeds complexity, and complexity blurs clarity.

Choosing Your Verb

The answer to the first question is a *verb*, often a verb in the form of a participle. Are you *creating, providing, building, enhancing, educating, feeding, leading, distributing, supporting, exporting, streamlining, eliminating, expediting*? Our verb is *inspiring*. We're inspiring people to follow Jesus. That's what our organization does. That's the win. That's the box top.

I doubt you need another lecture on the importance of mission statements. Your company probably has one. But does your mission statement state in unambiguous, memorable, inspiring terms what your organization *does*? What your organization exists to do is the *win*. So what's your verb? What's your participle? What are you doing?

If your organization lacks a unifying, galvanizing answer to our first question, it's not because your organization lacks purpose. It's because you or your leadership haven't invested the time necessary to *identify* the purpose and craft a memorable, clarifying statement, a statement that serves as a reminder as to why employees come to work every morning.

Skeptical but Curious

I was introduced to the concept of mission statements in 1989 while reading Stephen Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. While I found the concept compelling, it was an illustration I heard Covey use at a conference two years later that got my attention. He referenced the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain as an example of an organization that drove the concept of mission statements through every tier of the organization. According to Covey, the bellhops, cooks, and maids at Ritz-Carlton hotels had their own mission statements.

I was skeptical. An organizational mission statement, sure. But bellhops, cooks, and maids? How did a hotel chain catering to the 1 percent club get minimum wage employees to embrace a mission statement? How did the Ritz-Carlton convince individuals carting around designer luggage for wealthy patrons that they had a mission to accomplish? The way I saw it, that wasn't a mission. That was a job. Probably a part-time summer job. How does one convince people cleaning hotel rooms they can't afford to stay in that they have a mission? A job description, yes. But a mission? I was intrigued. Actually, as I said, I was skeptical.

As it turned out, Bill Johnson, the founder and owner of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, was a friend of my father's. Through that connection Bill and I were acquaintances. So I called him and asked if it was true, and if so, how they did it. He chuckled and said, "Well, I need to introduce you to Horst Schulze." Horst was Bill's COO. Horst graciously invited me, along with four members of my team, to sit in on a staff training he was conducting the following week.

It was amazing. Just shy of life-changing.

We watched as Horst led a group of thirty cooks, dishwashers, and maids through a series of short training sessions. Several men and women in the room spoke little English and required a translator. Horst shared a chapter of his own story. His introduction to the hotel business began in Germany as a teenager working in the kitchen of a prestigious hotel. He went on to describe the Ritz-Carlton way: the hotel's definition of success, why each of them was critical to the success of the hotel, and how the hotel's success would in turn make them more successful. No hype. No platitudes. Then

he paused and said something I'm quite confident none of those individuals had ever heard anyone say to them in their life:

"You were not *hired*. You were *selected*."

He spent several minutes talking about the value of the individual. Every individual. He said:

"I am an important person. I have an important job at the Ritz-Carlton. But I would be a fool to think I'm more important than you. No human being can claim importance over the next human being. So as human beings, we are equally important."

Then with authenticity and sincerity no one could question, he equated the value of individuals in that room to the value of the guests staying at a Ritz-Carlton hotel.

"You are not maids or dishwashers or cooks. That's what you do. That's a function you fulfill. We don't come to work to fulfill a function. We come to work to accomplish a mission together. We are in the service business. But we are not servants."

Then he introduced their mission statement. He didn't refer to it as a mission statement. He didn't need to.

"We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen."

He paused. Smiled.

"We are not servants. We are ladies and gentlemen, who are serving other ladies and gentlemen."

He included and thus equated himself with the men and women in the room. As I looked around, I was struck by the fact that these were folks who had rarely if ever been spoken to in that tone in those terms by

someone of his stature. It was amazing. We were in tears. We all wanted to work for Horst!

Later, as we debriefed, he said, “People need purpose and belonging. As human beings, it’s something we all crave.” He was right, of course. And Horst was committed to ensuring that every individual who was “selected” to work in his organization had an opportunity to experience both at work. The result? Under Horst’s leadership, in 1992, the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company became the first service-based company to be awarded the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Seven years later they won it a second time. They remain the only service organization to win the award twice.

Our takeaway? If a high-end hotel company can create missional language that connects service-level employees to the corporate mission, we have no excuse. We’ve been clarifying, creating, and wordsmithing organizational and departmental wins ever since.

Incomplete and Memorable

I heard it once and never forgot it: “We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.” It’s memorable, inspiring, and portable. Statements of that quality inform the conscience, which has the potential to influence behavior. We know intuitively when we fail to behave like ladies and gentlemen.

I included our encounter with Horst here because, while it aptly illustrates the third question, *Where do I fit in?*, it highlights several things related to clarifying your organizational win. Horst’s charge to maids and cooks was not and is not the official mission statement of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company. His statement is more memorable, inspirational, and actionable than the corporate statement. This is due in part to the backstory. Here’s the short version.

When he was fourteen years old, Horst announced to his parents that he wanted to work in a hotel. After failing to change his mind, they reluctantly enrolled him in a six-month boarding school for hotel work about eighty miles from their village. After graduating, he landed a three-year

apprenticeship at an upscale hotel and spa. His initial responsibility was cleaning ashtrays. From there, he was assigned to washing dishes. He worked from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. six days a week. Dishwashing led to polishing shoes left in the hallways to being allowed to carry food orders from the waiters to the kitchen staff, which led to actually serving the food himself.

The maître d' for the hotel was a gentleman in his early seventies, Karl Zeitler. Karl supervised the boys participating in the apprenticeship. He was who they all wanted to grow up to be. At the end of the apprenticeship, the boys were assigned to write an essay describing their work and the lessons they'd learned. Horst writes:

I didn't know what to say. I sat that evening in my little room pondering. I decided to write about Herr Zeitler. I described his impeccable dress, his elegant mannerisms, his genuine interest in each and every guest. It came to me that he was defining himself as a true gentleman.

Somewhere near the end of my essay, I coined the phrase *Damen und Herren im Dienst zu Damen und Herren*—"Ladies and Gentlemen Serving Ladies and Gentlemen." Like the maître d', we could be ladies and gentlemen as we went about our work. We were not just servants in the shadows of the service industry. We would rise to a higher identity, if we deserved it.¹¹

I love this story because it flips the script on where to begin the process of identifying the answer to our first question. Instead of thinking big, think small. Instead of starting with now, start with back then. Instead of thinking broadly, think narrowly. Horst imported a statement harvested from his frontline observations and experience and wove it into the fabric of what would become one of the most celebrated hotel companies in the world. It's a statement that captures the essence of the endless details involved in operating a luxury hotel.

Another observation to think about as you consider your *what*: Horst's statement is incomplete—on purpose. His purpose was to stimulate rather than explain. He elevated a single verb, *serve*, that encapsulated an endless list of verbs listed in a variety of job descriptions. The fatal flaw of most

corporate mission statements is that they say much and communicate little. They're comprehensive and forgettable and therefore not transferable. If you can't remember it, it's difficult to institute it. If you can't state it, it's difficult to know if you're doing it. Incomplete but memorable is better than complete and forgettable.

As you wrestle with the first question, my advice is that you not attempt to refine your current mission statement. Simply answer the first question as simply as possible. Find your verb and build to it. What are you doing? What's the win?

Question 2: Why Are You Doing It?

Clarifying *what* your organization does defines mission. Clarifying *why* provides inspiration. It's the *why* behind the *what*, the *why* that fuels the *what*. Here are a few questions to get you started:

- Why does your organization do what it does?
- What's at stake?
- What goes away if you go away?
- What problem goes unsolved?
- What need goes unmet?
- What question goes unanswered?
- What option becomes unavailable?
- What service goes unprovided?
- In what capacity does your organization make the world, or somebody's world, a better place?

The answer to *what* required a verb. The answer to *why* requires a "So that . . .," "Because . . .," or "In order to . . .". If initially nothing inspirational comes to mind, don't move on. Granted, you may not be digging wells, feeding children, or housing the homeless, but your organization wouldn't exist without a reason. That reason has a direct or perhaps indirect correlation to one or more of the questions listed above. If that correlation

is not immediately apparent, consider this: Once upon a time your organization didn't exist. Somebody, perhaps you, thought it was worth the time, effort, and risk to create it.

Why?

Your organization began as an idea in someone's mind. Bringing an idea to life is not a casual, inexpensive, stress-free endeavor. But somebody—again, maybe you—thought it was worth it. Why? To take it a step further back, once upon a time your industry didn't exist. But it does now. Why?

The first time I stood in front of a group to talk about starting a new church in a city full of churches, my *why* was as important as, or perhaps *more* important than, my *what*. So I addressed the elephant in the room right up front.

“Atlanta doesn't need another church.”

That wasn't new information. After a short pause, I continued:

“Atlanta needs another kind of church.”

My *why* then is still our *why* to this day. It continues to serve as the inspiration for our mission. Horst Schulze was correct when he said, “People crave purpose.” Being a means to an end beyond oneself is what makes life meaningful. Work that enables a father or mother to provide for his or her family makes that work meaningful. Providing jobs is a worthwhile *why* behind your *what*. If that's where you need to start, start there. But there's probably more to *why* than initially comes to mind.

Headwinds

A compelling answer to the second question accomplishes more than providing associates with a reason to come to work. *Why* provides a compelling reason to stay the course during seasons of uncertainty. This is especially true for those of us in point leadership.

I referenced my podcast conversation with Carol Tomé in chapter 1. Shortly after becoming CEO, Carol updated the UPS purpose statement. Note the participles:

Moving our world forward by delivering what matters.

That's a great statement. Little did she know that *what matters* was about to matter more than ever. Following her comment regarding how lonely it can be at the top, I asked her why she came out of retirement to take the helm of a company at the forefront of tackling the most disruptive event in our lifetime. Her *why* is why. She explained:

Maybe twenty years ago, I had a wake-up call and I'm like, You know what's going to be on my tombstone? "She worked hard." And I'm like, Oh, no, no, no, no! Nope, that cannot be. That is not my purpose. So I thought long and hard about it, and I said, "Okay, I want it to read, *She made a difference in my life.*"

But then I'm like, Carol, lots of people can say that. What is *your* purpose and how does that then translate into your legacy? So I thought about it, and this is what I landed on. It speaks to why I came out of retirement:

"I lead to inspire, I serve to create. I give to remain."¹²

Why is why Carol keeps at it. *Why* is why we will stay the course during seasons of uncertainty and failure as well. *Why* is why we're willing to navigate the loneliness, ingratitude, and disappointments that come prepackaged with point leadership. There's something at stake. There's something that goes undone otherwise. This is why it's critical to know the *why* behind your *what*. This is why it's essential we attach a *why* to the *what* we expect of the people in our organizations. The whirlwind is distracting, at times demoralizing. It's easy for *why* to literally be gone with the wind.

So, what's your *why*? Personally? Corporately? What's at stake? What goes away if you or your organization go away? What problem goes unsolved? What need goes unmet? What service goes unprovided? In what capacity does your organization make the world, or somebody's world, a better place? What's your *why*?

Question 3: Where Do I Fit In?

Few organizations are willing to go to the trouble to do for frontline employees what Horst Schulze did for the maids, dishwashers, and cooks at the Ritz-Carlton. Identifying and wordsmithing departmental and divisional wins requires a great deal of time and energy. Not to mention, it requires occasional updating. But the benefits are worth it. Because . . .

The deeper into the organization one *goes*, the less clarity one *finds*.

It's not just clarity that suffers. There's often an economic consequence as well, in retail and service industries in particular. In these industries, associates toward the bottom of the org chart and pay scale steward the most responsibility for the *critical event*: the interaction with the customer, the subscriber, the end user.

How many times have you chosen not to do repeat business with a retailer because of a bad in-store experience? We've all severed ties with service providers because of poor customer service. Your decision in those instances had nothing to do with what was going on at corporate. Someone earning at or slightly above minimum wage ensured your business went elsewhere.

In my conversation with Frank Blake, former CEO of The Home Depot, he shared that a week or two after stepping into that role, someone from outside the organization made a passing comment that recontextualized his recently elevated status. This individual said:

"Frank, you have a very prominent job, but you don't have a significant job. The only significant jobs in your organization are the jobs that interact with your customers."¹³

That's worth pausing to consider for a moment. This is *prominence* vs. *significance*. He continued:

"You're the person who gets to go out and speak to the analyst, and the community, and things like that, but the significant jobs in your company are the folks who interact with your customers every day."¹⁴

If the most “significant” jobs are the frontline jobs, it’s imperative that frontline employees have a crystal-clear understanding of what winning looks like in their role and how their win facilitates the organization’s win. The event directly related to the success of most organizations rarely occurs at headquarters. If the win needs to be clarified anywhere, it needs to be clarified in the environment where the critical event is executed.

Frank took that advice to heart and acted on it. He began spending less time at corporate and more time walking the floors at The Home Depot stores in an orange apron with his name scribbled on it in black magic marker. The *critical event* for The Home Depot happened just inside the doors of the local store, not at headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia.

The critical event for a company with 2,200-plus stores, 330,000-plus associates doing \$160 billion in annual sales,¹⁵ is stewarded by men and women in orange aprons. If those frontline employees have the most *significant* jobs, the jobs most critical to the success of the organization, it goes without saying they should show up at work with a clear understanding of the connection between what they *do* and what their organization *does*.

Mission matters, and memorable, portable mission statements matter. They’re not just a nice thing to have. They’re essential at every tier in the organization. This is the impetus behind our third question: *Where do I fit in?* This third question clarifies employees’ individual contribution to the corporate win.

Motivation is inextricably linked to potential outcome, which is yet another advantage for athletes and coaches. Organizational scoreboards are certainly helpful, but they fall short of the dynamic created by the scoreboard in a stadium full of cheering or booing fans with a clock counting down seconds. So we have our work cut out for us.

A Parable

You may be familiar with the parable of the three bricklayers. The short version goes something like this: A man was walking past a building project and saw three bricklayers hard at work, several yards apart. As he walked by, he asked each man the same question: “What are you doing?”

The first said, "I'm laying bricks."

The second said, "I'm building a wall."

The third said, "I'm creating a cathedral."

All three were correct. All three were actually doing all three. All three men were laying bricks, building a wall, and building a cathedral. One was focused on his *task*. The second was focused on a specific *outcome*: a wall. The third bricklayer had a *purpose*. He viewed his work as a means to an end that extended beyond both task and short-term outcome. To use our language, he understood how his job related to and facilitated a much bigger *win*. As my mentor Charlie Renfroe would say, the third bricklayer was "working on something big!"

Bricklayer, dishwasher, maid, cook; admin assistant, facility manager, data input technician, IT manager; programmer, engineer, coder . . . to paraphrase Horst, that's what associates *do*. That's the function they fulfill. Great leaders do the work necessary to ensure employees don't come to work primarily to perform a function. Great leaders clarify the connection between function and mission. Motivation surges when we understand how our specific tasks and responsibilities contribute to a meaningful outcome.

Before we consider how your associates contribute to the overall mission of your organization, let's start with you. In light of what your organization *does*:

Where do *you* fit in?

What is your essential role?

What is your primary contribution?

What is your core responsibility?

What goes undone if you go missing?

No doubt a list of things comes to mind. Several things on your initial list could be delegated. What remains can probably be consolidated with a simple statement. That simple statement is where you fit in. Another way of getting at it is to answer the question we raised earlier. If you only did what only you could do, what would you do? That's your primary value-add. What's your primary and essential contribution to the organizational win? That's where you fit in.

If you've hired well, positioned people well, and there are no nonessential

personnel, there is an answer to our third question for every position in your organization. Everybody *fits* in. Everybody plays an essential role. Everybody is a means to a win. The challenge lies in connecting those dots for employees. One way to accomplish this is to create *one-sentence responsibility descriptions* for every position in your organization.

One-Sentence Magic

Initially, I branded these *one-sentence job descriptions*. But it's not an associate's *job description* that connects them to the organization's win as much as it is the responsibility they carry. I want employees at every level in our organization to feel some responsibility for the success of our organization. Imagine a wide receiver who runs his pattern, then walks over to the sideline because, well, he did what the play required him to do. Or a punter who remains fixed on the spot where his kick lands him while the punt returner races by within a few feet of him. Actually, we can't imagine either scenario because athletes don't merely play a position; they play to win. They feel a weight of responsibility that extends beyond their position. Creating that same dynamic in organizational life is not easy, but it is possible, and to maximize engagement and execution it's essential.

While most management-level employees are responsible for several things, there's generally one task critical to the success of the organization, the ball we can't afford for them to drop. The task that has implications beyond their department or division. That's what goes into a one-sentence responsibility description (OSRD).

When presenting directors or a new direct report with their OSRD, I often say, "If things get confusing or you feel overwhelmed with all you've been tasked with, break the glass and read this. This is *the* thing among your *many* things that is essential to the success of our organization. This is the one thing we're depending on you for. This is the ball you can't afford to drop. This is the plate you must keep spinning."

For the record, we don't keep these behind glass. We keep them on desks. I referenced Diane's one-sentence responsibility statement in chapter 2, a statement she created herself.

To keep Andy's path clear of nonessential tasks and decisions, allowing him to do what only he can do.

Diane *does* a lot of things for me and for our organization. But she's primarily responsible for one thing. *That* thing. Here are several additional examples from our organization.

- Me: Inspire our staff and congregations to remain *fully engaged* in our mission and strategy.¹⁶
- CFO: Create, implement, and monitor systems that ensure our organization remains fiscally secure.
- Service Program Director: Create engaging, transformational weekend worship experiences.
- High School Environment Director: Create irresistible and transformational environments for high school students.
- Children's Environment Director: Create safe, irresistible environments for kindergarteners through fifth graders.
- Ministry Services Director: Create a seamless experience for everyone who walks through the doors of North Point Community Church.
- Guest Experience Director: Recruit, equip, and inspire volunteers to deliver remarkable guest experiences.
- Interns: Do what's asked and ask lots of questions.

Worth It

The thought of creating *responsibility statements* for every role in your organization may strike you as an enormous and perhaps unnecessary homework assignment. If that's the case, here's a suggestion: Begin with your direct reports. There are three immediate benefits to this approach. First, it will force you to think deeply about each individual's essential value-add to the organization. In the process, you may determine that you need to free up more of their time for what you consider primary.

A second benefit is you'll have an opportunity to communicate, perhaps

for the first time, what you view as their critical role, the one thing they do that is most important to you. This clarifies and aligns expectations. Just as uneven pavement jars the front end of your automobile out of alignment, the uneven pavement of organizational life has a way of misaligning expectations. Healthy employees want to know what their supervisors expect and what they consider most critical. They want to win.

Direct reports can't win if there's misalignment around how they fit in.

A third benefit to this approach is that you may find these conversations so helpful that you'll see this exercise less as a homework assignment and more as an opportunity to create greater strategic alignment throughout your organization. If your experience is like mine, your direct reports will see the benefit of this exercise and choose to replicate it with the people who report to them.

Ultimate Simplicity

Everybody likes to win. Great leaders clarify the win at every level of the organization. To establish and maintain clarity, everyone should know the answer to these three questions:

- What are we doing?
- Why are we doing it?
- Where do I fit in?

It's that simple.

Notes

Chapter 6: Great Leaders Clarify the Win

11. Horst Schulze, *Excellence Wins: A No-Nonsense Guide to Becoming the Best in a World of Compromise* (Zondervan, 2019), 23–24, Kindle.
12. *The Andy Stanley Leadership Podcast*, February 2022.
13. *The Andy Stanley Leadership Podcast*, September 2015.
14. *The Andy Stanley Leadership Podcast*, September 2015.
15. The Home Depot, Annual Report 2024, [https://ir.homedepot.com/~media/Files/H/HomeDepot-IR/2025/HD_2024_AR_IRsite_v2.pdf](https://ir.homedepot.com/~/media/Files/H/HomeDepot-IR/2025/HD_2024_AR_IRsite_v2.pdf).
16. The phrase *fully engaged* is terminology we use to denote specific and measurable levels of involvement in our organization.