

## Stop With The Phony Slogans

APRIL 2, 2018 • PHILIP PALAVEEV



We had just finished a three-hour session dedicated to articulating the mission statement of a successful advisory firm. We had written down the “why” statement on flip charts, and in big, bold letters we had documented the “core values” of the organization: “Utmost care for our clients, passion for what we do and excellence in how we deliver advice.”

Then lunch arrived, and a polite young man delivered boxes of barbecue and side dishes from a famous local place. The boxes said: “ABC Catering: Excellence, Passion, Care.”

This happens time and again. Firms spend an enormous amount of time crafting vision statements, missions, statements of values and “reasons why.” At the end, the vast majority of those efforts produce nothing but bland sentences full of the words: “premier,” “elite,” “passionate,” “real difference” and “commitment.” Those words offer no idea about the actual direction of a firm, the behavior of its people or the quality of the decisions they make.

Instead, I would recommend that firms take a good look in the mirror and rather than write empty statements try to answer in an honest and transparent manner the most pressing questions.

Those questions may be difficult to confront and tackle, but behind them are usually the answers everyone in the firm craves. Typically, the questions are:

- What will happen to the firm when the founders retire?
- What are our biggest weaknesses, and how will we address them?
- What are the toughest competitive challenges we face, and how will we tackle them?
- What gives us confidence that we will continue to grow and be successful?
- What are the best opportunities we face, and how can we capture them?
- What do I need to do to be successful in this firm?
- Do our leaders have enough self-awareness to recognize their limitations and overcome them?
- What are the weaknesses in our culture and how can we prevent them from getting in our way?
- What are the deficient behaviors our culture exhibits, and how can we solve them?

The great work of Jim Collins, Simon Sinek and many other business authors reminds us that our visions and missions have to be genuine if they are to be effective. Propaganda visions and fake missions inspire no one and propel no business forward. In fact, they damage the credibility of a firm's leadership and demoralize the team.

Many successful businesses derive from one entrepreneur's sense of direction and purpose. But those things are a bit like true love—they tend to happen only when they happen. Locking up a dozen financial executives in a boardroom will not produce a love poem no matter how many times they use the word "passionate."

## **Vision**

Without vision and direction, a business can easily get lost in the daily scramble to service clients and find new relationships. Routine can lead to stagnation.

The vision should be more than a bunch of big words. It should be something that helps you make difficult decisions, not avoid them.

Take, for example, the founder of a technology consulting firm I once briefly worked with. He and his co-founders were at first working out of the basement in his house. He told me at the time that their vision was simple but compelling: "Get out of the basement!" As simple as it was, it was tangible, and told you everything you needed to know.

Inflated words, on the other hand, don't help you describe any sort of future. I challenge you to run your vision statement through a Google search and see what happens. If you write something like: "We will be the most admired, premier firm in [choose location] serving the needs of [these target clients] with passion, the relentless pursuit of excellence, dedication and devotion to make a real difference and serve the goals of clients in our communities," then chances are you're in the company of another 5,000 service businesses—including catering companies, gyms and beauty salons.

A good vision perhaps does not have to be 50 years ahead, as Jim Collins says. Instead it should answer the biggest question in the minds of the clients and the team: "Can we exist in this state

after our founders are gone?" A great vision may very well have a compelling answer to that question, and until it's answered, all the other visions could ring hollow.

A good statement of values also steers people's behavior.

## **Mission And Values**

When we ask G2 Leadership Institute students to write the values of their organizations, they inevitably use the words "excellence," "integrity," "teamwork," "collaboration," "passion" and "innovation."

There's nothing wrong with those ideas, but what really happens in the daily reality of their firms? Remember that "Respect, Integrity, Communication and Excellence" were the words that Enron put on its website. Merely making the statements does not alter reality. The values need to be lived. In most firms, the question is not: "What are the values we want to have?" but rather, "What are the values we fail to live up to?"

The single biggest failing of leaders is not that they make bad decisions—we all do sometimes—but that they don't demonstrate values like these in their behavior and actions. We say "collaboration" but then make decisions on our own. We say "respect," but then berate employees. We say "innovation," but then start most arguments by saying, "This is the way we do things here." We say "integrity," but then go on an all-expenses trip paid for by a product vendor.

We do further damage by rationalizing why it's OK for us (the founders, the CEOs, the leaders, the partners) to take that trip or to have that tantrum.

Rather than writing what looks good on the wall, every leader is better served by asking these questions honestly:

- Where do we fail to give the right example?
- Where do our actions and our words diverge?
- What are the most difficult ethical and moral issues our employees face and have we given them enough guidance on how to make decisions about them?

A leader's inspiration comes more from examples than speeches. Leading means making difficult decisions and answering difficult questions—that's what the values discussion should focus on.

## **Strategy**

Strategy is another area where big words are used with little or no impact. Our strategies are often poorly articulated and fail to address the well-known issues that face our companies. Most strongly resemble New Year's resolutions: "grow," "provide amazing services to clients," "develop our team," "improve our operational productivity."

Instead, we should ask:

- Why did we not grow last year?
- What are we not doing for clients that we should?
- Why did we suffer turnover, and why are the skills of the team not growing?

The great David Maister wrote an article he later turned into a book, *Strategy and the Fat Smoker*. There, he observed that most individuals know exactly what they need to do and change—to quit smoking and lose weight, for example. But the obvious rarely turns into the realistic for them—or for organizations. “Real strategy,” he writes, “lies not in figuring out what to do, but in devising ways to ensure” we do it.

Strategic planning too often states good intentions rather than practical ways the organization can change and how individuals can change that behavior. Again, we must ask questions: Do we set organizational growth goals or do we assign specific individual responsibilities? Do we make statements about coaching people or do we name partners who will act as coaches? Are we willing to write names next to each goal? What happens when goals are not reached? What are the mechanisms of accountability?

### **From Big Words To The Real World**

Visions, missions and strategies are the foundations of an organization. They help guide our firms and provide much needed answers when the circumstances and decisions are unclear. To be effective, though, all those statements have to be grounded in the practical reality of our firms. They have to answer the questions that keep people—the clients, the owners and the team—awake at night. Most of the time, those questions are well-known. But they are also difficult.

I grew up in a communist country, and you could say that I have a special appreciation for propaganda. If you think the Soviet slogans were very far from the statements produced by advisory firms, try this: “Having the right talent means everything.”—Joseph Stalin. Empty words disguising reality is nothing new, but it was never the solution and it is certainly not doing anything positive for advisory firms.

They say that the last slogan produced by the Soviet propaganda machine was, “Down with slogans!”

*Philip Palaveev is the CEO of the Ensemble Practice LLC. He’s an industry consultant, author of the books G2: Building the Next Generation and The Ensemble Practice and the lead faculty member for the G2 Institute.*

---

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Reproductions and distribution of this news story are strictly prohibited.

- [View reprint options](#)
- [Order a reprint article now](#)
- [Print](#)