

Three Question Consulting

Simple is good; especially in business. Any time you can use a simple solution to solve a business problem, even a complex one, simplicity is a good route to take. Sometimes I think we turn things around when we over-complicate things by formulating complex solutions to fairly basic business issues.

At the annual Business Planning Retreats Violand Management holds in the fall we spend a lot of time helping business owners identify just what it is that inspires them and their people to pursue worthwhile goals in their businesses. They're called Mission statements. I'm sure you're familiar with these. You've probably heard people talk about how important they are to your business. Maybe you've seen a company's Mission statement framed and hanging proudly in their lobby. You might even have your own Mission statement. That's a good thing.

What's not so good is when we over-complicate our Missions by expressing statements we think we ought to be using, or when we include things we think other people want to hear.

Recently I came across an exercise that might help you sort through some of this mental clutter by getting right to the source of what ignites your passion in your business; what keeps you going when business becomes uncertain, frightening, or just plain monotonous. It comes from the cofounder of Fast Company magazine, Alan Webber.

Take an index card. On one side write your answer to this question: "What gets you up in the morning?" What gets you so revved up you just can't stay in bed any longer?

After you've written your answer challenge it. Don't accept it at face value. Ask yourself why this particular thing excites you. What emotions

does it stir? Strive to go two or three levels deep with your answer. Once you think you've identified what drives you from your bed in the morning boil your answer down to one sentence.

Now, on the other side of the card, write your answer to another question: "What keeps you up at night?" Just as with your answer to the first question you don't have to accept your first answer at face value. If you don't like it, throw it out and start anew. Allow yourself some time to complete this exercise. It's not a race. There's nothing that says your first answer is the best answer. Continue to challenge what you wrote by asking yourself why you wrote what you did.

Webber goes on to suggest "Pare each response down to a single sentence." When your answers to both questions give you a sense of meaning and direction, you're well on your way to a very concise Mission Statement.

As with any Mission Statement you can use your answers to guide you throughout the day. But just as with any Mission Statement you have to check them occasionally to make sure they're still accurate.

Perhaps the greatest value of this exercise comes in when you don't like one or both of your answers. When that's the case you ask yourself the tough question "What are you going to do about it?"

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"Use them as your compass, checking from time to time to see if they're still true. If you don't like one or both of your answers, it opens up a new question: "What are you going to do about it?"

For many business owners these are challenging times. Economic uncertainty; changing customer demands; rapidly changing technology. There are days when we have to remind ourselves why get up in the morning and press on with our businesses. There are days when it's hard to remember. This is perhaps most striking when it comes to

understanding what motivates us to carry on in our businesses.

Don't be disappointed if your first attempt isn't exactly what you want to say.

When our companies are young we find all kinds of reasons to get out of bed. Every day brings new challenges.

Business owners, or at least their bookkeepers, are rarely at a loss to find things that keep them up at night. Slow cash flow.