

99% of purposes aren't worth the paper they're written on. Here's how to make sure yours is

Many people believe a business's purpose expresses its reason for existing, a rallying cry, some expression of corporate social responsibility. It doesn't. It describes what makes a business unique, who it will help and what impact it will have for them over the long term.

Temps de lecture : minute

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There are two big issues with purpose today. Firstly, there are too many limp (inspiring but empty) purpose statements and secondly, there are not enough purpose-driven businesses. Put another way, too many purpose statements lack either “stretch” or “teeth”. A good purpose statement has stretch and teeth. Of course, how your purpose statement is articulated is important. But it's critical that it stretches your business beyond what it does today, making change and innovation imperative. It must also have enough teeth to force the difficult choices that will ensure you deliver on that imperative, both at a strategic level, guiding where you play and don't play, and also on a day-to-day level as you consider how to execute your strategy.

Most purpose statements we see in the business world today are deeply flawed. It's no wonder most people don't care about them. According to one study in 2019, by PricewaterhouseCoopers, only 28 per cent of employees felt connected to their company's purpose, and even fewer felt their organisation was genuinely purpose-driven. Our work must feel purposeful, otherwise navigating the challenges we face every day just

won't ever feel worth it.

How to get it right

First, nail down what your actual purpose is. You may already have a sense of what your purpose might be, you might even have a statement that elicits some affection and warm feelings in the business. But there's a big but. Have you really nailed it down and articulated it in a way that will unlock the change, impact and performance you want to see? This is the big question. The power of purpose is the combination of a big idea, simply expressed, led with total conviction — in a way that inspires focused, committed action from your teams.

Having defined it, you must surrender to the statement's demands and allow it to change your leadership and your business. This is an ongoing commitment, not a one-time exercise. Purpose can't be "hired out" to a consultant who goes away, runs some focus groups and comes back with a list of concepts to choose from. Nor can it be created by asking hundreds of your people what they'd like it to be.

To get to a purpose statement that offers clear direction and leads to concrete action, senior leaders need real skin in the game. They need the right stimulus and then they need to argue it out themselves in order to be ready to lead it. Authorship creates ownership, so leaders need to be fully in, participating in every step of the process as a team.

Action matters more, but words do matter

We are obsessed with clearly expressed purpose statements. We have seen the incredible power of getting the language right. Collaborating with a team to express powerful ideas in simple language may take a lot of work, but even small changes can unlock renewed energy, articulate what really makes you distinct and open up more opportunities to grow

and have impact. However, most executive teams, perhaps excluding a few marketing experts, hate the wordsmithing aspect of drafting a purpose. Others might worry about overcommitting or creating a heavy burden the company is obligated to carry into the future forever after.

To help everyone get on board, look at examples of weak and strong purpose statements. Determine what good looks like, as well as what not to do.

Your purpose must be:

- Startlingly clear
- Simple – yet it should also capture strategic nuance
- Compelling – yet it should also make commercial sense
- Inspire pride – yet it should also challenge us to be more and do more
- Roll off the tongue of every leader in your team – this is important above all

What not to do

Avoid a lofty and general commitment to do good that does not connect to the business's core activities in the marketplace. For example: "We exist to make a better world." Whatever product or service this business sells, it's probably not making the world better and this purpose statement had to be tacked on. Or at least that's how it seems.

A bland description of a business that requires no stretch to fulfil, just more of the same, will also lead to failure. An example of this type of flawed purpose statement would read like: "We exist to provide the highest-quality widgets." It lacks differentiation and ambition and requires nothing new from the business. How can teams in this widget factory be inspired to grow when a poorly written purpose statement tells them not to bother?

If it's done right, a purpose statement can change your business.

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