

The first principle of a magnitude better.

By Andrew Wells. December 2019

Ever wanted the organisation you lead to become a magnitude better? It is not an uncommon goal. Start on that journey and you will soon find yourself working on a range of factors to achieve your goal. In this article we will extract one master principle from the mix, and give it the credit it is due.

It has been my personal and professional good fortune to have worked over the years with many good people¹. People who run good organisations which they want to improve still further, people who turnaround ailing businesses, people who start great businesses and get those to flourish, people who have a magnitude better in their line of sight. It has been a privilege for me to contribute and to learn so much along the way. On that basis it is my goal in this article to make your challenging ambition simpler to pursue and thus easier to achieve. A magnitude more likely to happen in fact. A good place to start.

The first and master principle in organisational leadership is to select and maintain your aim. It is worth pausing on this one.

My call, in this article, is to take this factor far more seriously in business. That does not necessarily mean to suggest spending that much more time labouring over it. It probably does mean applying

better quality of thought, attention, and care in crafting your aim though. Then expressing it and integrating it more effectively in the fabric of what your people do. To select and maintain your aim in a way that is a magnitude better in fact.

In business we see and use various expressions which relate to our aim. Few of these naturally encourage better communication and engagement, or more innovation, or greater performance. Speaking with an investor recently about a start up I am involved with, one of the first questions she asked the team about the business was: “what’s your mission statement?” Normally a short pithy statement, and a proud smile, would suffice as the appropriate response to that question. We explained our aim instead, starting with the clarity of our purpose and taking her stage by stage, layer by layer through a mission plan: goal by goal, milestone by milestone, expectation by expectation. Mission comes first, and it is not a glib statement. So let’s not move on from the question too quickly.

For anyone familiar with UK Defence Doctrine, the principle, “the selection and maintenance of the aim”, will be immediately recognised. It is the first and master principle for the prosecution of war. But I am not suggesting for one moment that running a business, directing a successful organisation, delivering a business turnaround, or putting together

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a start up is akin to war. Not at all. I do not know what war is like, thankfully, and I would not know how to conduct one. For us in business though, that the same idea has such emphasis in such another walk of life suggests it should perhaps prompt our real interest?

Mission, vision, strategy, business plan... these are all concepts we know. It could be that our familiarity with these terms breeds superficiality. Far too seldom is enough heed paid to what a well crafted and well maintained aim can really do for an organisation's fortunes.

Ask your managers what they think the business planning cycle is used for in your organisation, for instance. If the (real!) answer is along the lines of "keeping our feet to the fire" (rather than for engaging with them to get the best from their talents, ideas and ambitions, and to build on those, and align those with the purpose of the business) your process will be void of the best of its value. It will not underpin your business becoming a magnitude better, when it could so easily be switched to a means to do just that.

If your business planning cycle is the means you have to maintain the aim of your organisation, then it should always be configured to give people, wherever they are in your business, strength, momentum, motivation, and greater freedom to perform and develop.

A well known British entrepreneur explained to me recently the way he saw business planning and how he uses business plans with the businesses he invests in and helps. He regards a business plan as a lens to look through, as a compass to steer by, as a practical and objective tool to guide the decisions that happen in the business, anywhere in the business. Importantly he saw it as a thesis to return

to: to check, to update, to maintain. Strategy marries tactics. He remarked that this was rarely the normal practice he encounters when he first gets involved. We are not, it would seem, stating the obvious here, not in practice.

It is the role of those who direct the organisation to make sense of things, to provide clarity, to stretch the collective ambition. It is for those who lead to ensure enthusiasm, coherency, and action. The selection and maintenance of your aim is the starting point from which the logic of your business flows and on which your business model evolves. Crafting your aim is where real game changing leverage can almost always still be found. So push your thinking on how you do it.



When it comes to crafting the aim for your organisation, let me offer three criteria. The first two of these we have already seen. Your aim should be accessible and useful to your people, in practice for them: as "a lens to look through" and "a compass to steer by".

Develop your aim as a "lens" to give your people the immediate and consistent basis for understanding your business model and the trajectory of the business on which to calibrate their decisions. Use your aim as a "compass" to point up the ideals your business should conform to and strive towards along the way: the characteristics of "the way we do things", as well as "what we do".

Your aim should be coherent and cohesive across your organisation: ubiquitous and yet at the same time uniquely useful in each individual scenario and situation that your business encounters. Build in these functionalities and you will have done a good job of selecting your aim. It

is a very challenging narrative to construct, but then a magnitude better is not just going to fall out of the tree for you.

The third criterion is concerned with creativity. Creativity is an essential element in what it takes to become a magnitude better. So, craft your aim accordingly.

The composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim is attributed with saying: “if you ask me to write a song about the ocean, I’m stumped. But if you tell me to write a ballad about a woman in a red dress falling off her stool at three in the morning, I’m inspired.” The impresario Cameron Mackintosh is credited with calling Stephen Sondheim “possibly the greatest lyricist ever”. I would scratch “possibly” from that accolade, personally, but I am not a go-to authority on musical theatre, so don’t take my word for it.

What Sondheim’s quote highlights here for us though is what your aim should do for the process of creativity in your business and improvement of organisational performance. Boundaries give us traction in our thinking and for our decision making. Well placed parameters will help you immeasurably to beget the creativity necessary for a magnitude better.

Make sure your aim does not ask your people to contemplate the ocean. Meet this criterion as well and you can be assured you will have done a truly great job of selecting your aim. You will have done it a magnitude better in fact.



In the military context the statement of the principle, “the maintenance of the aim”, assumes the expectation that the crucial factors of communicating and aligning with the aim along the chain of command, and putting it into practise are included. I would humbly suggest that these ideals might be rather less assured in most civilian organisations. At least that is what my own long experience leads me to reason! So don’t skimp the effort on these things either.

Like all tools, leave your aim on the table, put it in the draw, or hang it on the wall, and no matter how elegantly crafted, it will simply not do anything much for you on its own. We have to use it. Our efforts must turn to pursuing the aim: embedding it, using it, and maintaining it in its proper sense. Let’s not move on too quickly from that either.

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